

“I Cannot Imagine Life Without It”:

*A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Relevance of
Spirituality for Health and Wellbeing*

Siri Christine Kvernmo Næss

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Institutt for sosialt arbeid og helsevitenskap
Norges teknisk- naturvitenskapelige universitet (NTNU)
Trondheim

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exists, and that those other worlds must contain meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.

William James

Abstract

The interest in the dynamics between spirituality, health and wellbeing has virtually exploded in the last few decades, and a growing amount of research convey that there is an important link between spiritual factors and health status. However, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of this relationship - the multifaceted and elusive nature of spirituality poses definitional challenges, and central elements both overlaps with, and differs from, religion. Thus, the research field reflects both controversy and confusion with regard to conceptualization and measurement, which challenge the pertinence of findings. This study explores the lived experience of spirituality as it relates to health and wellbeing, and aims to identify some of the mechanisms mediating the spirituality-health relationship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 women regarding the importance of their experiences with spirituality for health and wellbeing. The interviews were transcribed slightly verbatim mode, and further analysed within the transcendental phenomenological framework. Four major themes emerged as descriptors of the meaning and relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing: *Understanding Spirituality*, *Coping and Empowerment*, *Physical Impacts* and *The Self and Society*. The participants' understanding of spirituality is comprised of four dimensions: as a process of rediscovery, as broader than religion, as mediated by transcendent experiences and spiritual practices. Coping and empowerment highlight spirituality as a psychological resource through seven pathways: power of perception, strength and calmness, spiritual surrender, existential meaning, trust and protection, self-improvement and helping others. Both positive and negative physical impacts are illuminated. Moreover, the findings suggest that spirituality functions as a nexus between personal and social wellbeing, promoting authenticity, critical thinking, social tension, doubt and the need for plausible explanations. Included is an in-depth description and a discussion of the findings, as well as suggestions for health-care practitioners and directions for future research.

Sammendrag

Den vitenskapelige interessen for forholdet mellom spiritualitet/åndelighet og helse og velvære har økt betraktelig i løpet av de siste årene. Det foreligger nå en mengde forskningsrapporter som viser at spirituelle faktorer er av betydning for helsetilstand. Forskningsfeltet er imidlertid preget av kritiske spørsmål med henhold til konseptualisering og hva rapportene egentlig viser. Det er med andre ord et behov for mer kunnskap om det grunnleggende forholdet mellom spiritualitet med helse. Hensikten med denne studien er å skape en dypere forståelse av hvordan mennesker opplever relevansen av spiritualitet for helse og velvære. Gjennom en fenomenologisk tilnærming til forskningsfeltet ønsker jeg å finne ut mer om de underliggende mekanismene som forbinder spiritualitet med helse og velvære. Datamaterialet består av semi-strukturerte forskningsintervju med ti kvinner vedrørende betydningen av spiritualitet for deres opplevelse av helse og velvære. Intervjuene ble transkribert i sin helhet og videre analysert innenfor det transendentale fenomenologiske perspektivet. Analysen resulterte i fire sentrale tema: *Forståelsen av spiritualitet, Mestring og empowerment, Fysisk påvirkning* og *Selvet og samfunnet*. Deltakernes forståelse av spiritualitet belyses gjennom fire dimensjoner: en prosess av indre gjenoppdagelse, et bredere konsept enn religion, personlige erfaringer og spirituelle praksiser. Temaet mestring og empowerment beskriver spiritualitet som en psykologisk ressurs gjennom følgende syv aspekter: kraften i oppfattelsen, styrke og ro, åndelige overgivelse, eksistensiell mening, tillit og beskyttelse, selvforbedring, samt å hjelpe andre. Både positiv og negativ påvirkning på fysisk helse og velvære presiseres. Studien viser en nær sammenheng mellom personlig og sosialt velvære gjennom temaene: autentisitet, kritisk tenkning, sosial spenning, tvil og forklaring. Funnene presenteres og diskuteres, og studien konkluderer med implikasjoner for helsepersonell, og forslag til fremtidig forskning.

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1. Introduction

This is a phenomenological study of the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing. The phenomenological approach focuses wholly on the subjective aspects of people's experiences, and aims to uncover the essential structure of shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell 2007, Lin 2013). Appropriately, the purpose of this study is to convey an in-depth description of the lived experience of spirituality as it relates to health and wellbeing. This chapter introduces the background of the study and the phenomenon of interest, including the guiding research question with its associated sub-questions, and an overview of the content.

1.1 Background

Throughout most of human history, people have viewed spirituality as relevant for their health and wellbeing, and the interpretation of physical illness through a spiritual frame of reference dates back to the earliest known civilizations of the world (Koenig 2002, Assagioli 2007). However, this interlinking between spirituality and health ruptured during the rapid growth of scientific knowledge, technological advancement and institutional differentiation in the 19th and 20th centuries (McGuire 1993). A key role in this "divorce" was the evolution of Western medicine from the biomedical paradigm. The strong influence of a presumption of the physical body as distinctly separate from the mind, resulted in a preoccupation with physical mechanics to the detriment of social, psychological, spiritual and behavioural dimensions of the human person (p.147). Further marginalization occurred through psychiatry's redefinition of spiritual beliefs and experiences as symptoms of mental disturbances (e.g. hysteria, neurosis and psychotic delusion). This formed the basis of a conflict between the medical community and religion/spirituality that has yet to be resolved. Since this conflict has been embedded in the social fabric of the medical community for decades, the spiritual resources of patients have tended to go unnoticed by health-care professionals (Koenig 2009, 2012, Koenig & Larson 2001). The medical community's ignoring of the relevance of religion and spirituality for people's lives has also been linked to empirical evidence from US surveys,

which show a considerably less prevalence of religious and spiritual beliefs among health-care professionals, especially psychiatrists, than the general public (Hill et al. 2000, Koenig 2012).

The landscape is, however, changing. Over the last decades, a striking rise in the public and academic interest in holistic health-care has emerged, and the established borders between different specialized sectors are increasingly challenged. Spirituality is now included in a broader discourse promoting a holistic approach to life, and actors from various sectors in society are voicing their endorsement of an official reunion between spirituality and health (Gibson 2006, McGuire 1993). Accordingly, there is a massive amount of academic literature on the spirituality-health relationship, which propose that there is a significant link between spiritual factors and health status. Findings suggest that spiritual beliefs and practices influence “clinical outcomes, illness prevention, coping, recovery and how patients define their illness experiences” (McBride, Arthur, Brooks & Pilkington 1998:122). Although the majority of the research indicate a positive influence of religion and spirituality on health - the nature of these indicators are heavily debated (Koenig, King & Carson 2012, Hill & Pargament 2008). Hence, there is quite a bit of controversy associated with the field as inconsistent conceptualization, as well as insufficient study designs and analysis, challenge the validity of findings (Miller & Thoresen 2003, Seybold & Hill 2001, Hill & Pargament 2008, Berry 2005).

1.2 Phenomenon of Interest

1.2.1 Spirituality

Spirituality is a complex, and intangible phenomenon (Miller & Thoresen 1999, Hill et al. 2000), with strong historical ties to religion, or the supernatural (Koenig 2008a, 2008b). Traditionally, spirituality signified an individual’s personal relationship with the divine, while religion was the collective expression of this relationship. Thus, the words religion and spirituality were used to describe different aspects of the same essence, namely, humanity’s interaction with the divine dimension (s) of life. Over the last few decades, this close interlinking between religion and spirituality has moved from union to separation, increasingly obscuring the supernatural elements. Now, religion typically connotes a more static organization of prescribed rituals, established rules of conduct, and specific ways of

thinking. Spirituality, on the other hand, is increasingly used to describe the individual's personal values and path towards self-fulfilment, meaning and purpose, happiness, wellbeing, connectedness, transcendence and/or ultimate truth (Pargament 1999, Hill & Pargament 2008, Koenig 2008a, 2008b, Heelas 2002). This polarization between spirituality and religion has positioned spirituality as superior to traditional religion - more up-to-date and compatible with a modern lifestyle. Hence, religion is increasingly perceived of as an inferior and outdated construct (Hill & Pargament 2008, Vincett & Woodhead 2009). Accordingly, contemporary spirituality could be understood as "a movement which arises in the nineteenth century in conscious reaction against existing forms of traditional religion, particularly the more conservative Christian churches" (Vincett & Woodhead 2009:320).

Vincett and Woodhead (2009) identify three main varieties of contemporary spirituality viewed as independent of religion. The first, Mind, Body, Spirit have a strong focus on health enhancement. The approach is rather practical, and involves engaging people in activities and treatments designed to integrate physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing (e.g. acupuncture, homeopathy, aromatherapy, massage, yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong and various forms of group meditation (p. 324). The second, New Age, is characterized by its distinct emphasis on personal purpose, that is, the desire to find and express one's true identity. This term has been the recurrent object of public scrutiny and ridicule, and scholars argue whether the movement continues to grow, or if it is declining (p. 326-327). The third branch of spirituality, Paganism, or Neo-Paganism, is a more collectively organized practice highly devoted to nature and the celebration of earthly elements and cycles, as well as a focus on Occultism, spiritual beings and ancestors, and the gods and goddesses of ancient cultures (p. 328). Additionally, Vincett & Woodhead introduce a fourth term, Theistic Spirituality, which captures the more recent observations of an increased mixing of elements between new forms of spirituality and traditional theistic religions (p. 329). Although there are differences between various kinds of spirituality, the common denominator seems to be a strong emphasis on individual adaption, and thus the absence of a clear authority (Vincett & Woodhead 2009).

The many varieties of spirituality are often referred to as a "spiritual marketplace" which caters to the individualization and consumer mentality of Western culture (Bowman 1999, Hanegraff 2009). Because these forms of spirituality promote the freedom to combine elements from different religious traditions and philosophies, they are particularly suitable for people living in societies characterized by social and cultural diversity (Vincett & Woodhead 2009). Heelas (2002) underscores that it is precisely this relevance for modern life which

makes these types of spirituality so attractive - “they cater for what many today are most interested in: their own intimate and personal (and their relational) lives” (p. 370). Spirituality is said to engage people over the world, but is particularly prominent among the educated middle classes, along with those who take an active distance from – and those who challenge – the established structures of society. Although some uncertainty exists, research carried out in Europe and America estimates that: 2 – 5% of the population are highly committed participants; approximately 10 – 20% claim to be “spiritual, not religious”; while somewhere between 20 – 40% agree with beliefs characteristic of spirituality (Vincett & Woodhead 2009:323).

Although spirituality has increasingly parted from the traditional concept of religion, several scholars (Pargament 1999, Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott 1999, Hill & Pargament 2008, Hill et al. 2000, Koenig 2008a, 2008b, 2012) vigilantly oppose this trend, and argue that religion and spirituality are overlapping constructs that should remain integrated. According to Hill and Pargament (2008), a polarization of concepts is unfortunate because it produces an oversimplistic perspective that fails to account for the fact that all forms of spirituality and religion are expressed within a social context, and are preoccupied with personal issues (p. 4). Koenig (2008a) emphasizes the need to establish an academic consensus on a definition of spirituality that does not include mental health indicators (e.g. connection with others, purpose, meaning, beliefs, values, feelings of wonder, awe or love, forgiveness, gratitude, support). The inclusion of mental health indicators in measures of spirituality contaminates the findings, making it impossible to establish meaningful correlations. There has to be something that uniquely distinguishes spirituality from other concepts, especially for research purposes. He argues that spirituality - as something different from other psychosocial concepts - must remain connected to religion, or at least to the transcendent (p. 17).

Koenig’s (2008a) position concurs with the definition of spirituality established by a consensus panel of experts at the National Institute of Healthcare Research (NIHR) in 1997 (George, Larson, Koenig & McCullough 2000). In reviewing the existing evidence linking religious and spiritual factors to health, the panel conclude that religion and spirituality are overlapping concepts, and that both include *a sacred core* and *a search process*. They define the sacred as “a socially influenced perception of either some divine being, or some sense of ultimate reality or truth” (Larson, Swyers & McCullough 1998:20). According to Miller and Thoresen (1999), spirituality is a far too complex construct to be “defined by any single continuum, or by dichotomous classifications”. Instead, “spirituality is better understood as a

multidimensional space in which every individual can be located” (p. 6). Regardless of definitions, spirituality originates in the human conditioning. The authors propose that there are three main domains of *spiritual practices, beliefs and experiences* that capture the more universal aspects of spirituality, and which allows for an exploration of spirituality both outside and/or inside the context of religion. Because each domain can encompass a wide variety of measures and constructs, they are accessible to both quantitative and qualitative approaches to inquiry (p. 7). However, because of the lack of consensus, and diverse connotations, this study will further examine the concept of spirituality through the participants’ perceptions as reflected in the data.

1.2.2 Health & Wellbeing

As previously mentioned, there has been a general broadening in the understanding of health, which is based on an increased recognition of health as more than just the absence of disease (Fisher, Francis & Johnson 2000, Stratham & Chase 2010). This is reflected in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definition of health as a “state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of the disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization 2003). Although the WHO definition, which was formulated in 1946, quickly became the most popular and applied definition of health worldwide, its applicability is heavily debated (Larson 1996). Critics argue that the definition is over-simplistic, unrealistic, utopian and inflexible - complete physical, mental and social wellbeing is almost unattainable. A central part of the objection involves the incorporation of “wellbeing” as a standard for health. Because it is such an all-embracing concept, wellbeing is particularly difficult to identify and measure, and it poses as an ongoing challenge to delineate and evaluate the various dimensions of health (pp. 182-183). Thus, the research based on wellbeing is both confusing and conflicting, and measures of wellbeing often overlap with other concepts such as “quality of life” and “life satisfaction” (Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders 2012).

Stratham and Chase (2010) explain that “wellbeing” was included in the definition of health as an official response to a general movement that was pushing for a de-medicalization of health. The positive side about using wellbeing as a pointer to health, is the concept’s sensitivity to the subjective experience of people’s health. Basically, wellbeing refers to the quality of people’s lives. Because wellbeing has been diversely approached, several dimensions (e.g. happiness, positive affect, negative affect, satisfaction with life, psychological functioning and human development) are variously emphasized throughout the

literature (Dodge et al. 2012). However, White (2010) identifies three key qualities that appear to be consistent throughout the many different contexts of wellbeing. First, the “well” within wellbeing signals that it is something positive, and thus desirable. Second, wellbeing promotes a holistic perception of health in which people are free to connect their bodily experiences with the mental, emotional and spiritual, which challenges the mind-body dualism found in the biomedical health model. Third, wellbeing recognizes the relevance of peoples’ own perspectives and experiences of their health. From these three qualities of positivity, holism, and subjectivity, wellbeing typically connotes an experience of “doing well and feeling good” (p.160). In reviewing various descriptions of wellbeing, Dodge et al. (2012) opt for a new definition. In this definition, wellbeing is something that emerges as the “balance point” between a person’s resources and challenges:

Stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa (p. 230).

The definition cited above aims to capture the dynamic interplay between a person’s resources and challenges, and how people’s wellbeing is affected by their ability to cope with life experiences. Additionally, it should be mentioned that the World Health Organization (2012) distinguishes between objective and subjective components of wellbeing. Objective components involve healthy life expectancy as measured by material factors, such as income, conditions of residency, education and employment, and also the absence of a long-term limiting illness or disability. Subjective components include people’s own evaluation of their life and experiences in daily living (WHO 2012, Alartartseva & Barysheva 2015). The WHO (2012) also recognizes that “health and wellbeing form a two-way relationship: health influences overall wellbeing, but wellbeing is also a predictor of future health” (p. 17). The present study focuses wholly on the subjective aspects of wellbeing as indicated by the participants’ own experiences and evaluation of their sense of wellbeing.

In tune with the prevailing discourse, an even more nuanced approach is developing, and recent definitions of health generally include physical, mental, emotional, social, occupational, and spiritual components (Hawks 1994). A relevant question within the context of this study is whether a spiritual dimension should be included in the official WHO definition (Larson 1996). The World Health Organization has long acknowledged the spiritual component of health, and there have been several discussions on whether a spiritual

dimension should be incorporated into the official definition of health (Nagase 2012, Khayat 1998, Chirico 2016, Dahr, Chaturvedi & Nandan 2011). Although suggested proposals have not yet reached consensus, the discussions have yielded an increased understanding of the importance of spirituality for health and wellbeing. One example is the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, which was signed by all the governments of the European nations in 1995. In this declaration European countries pledge to recognize the spiritual needs of their populations, as well as to integrate spiritual ideals in future policy developments. However, it could be debated whether these nations have kept to the commitment of nurturing the spiritual needs of their citizens (Vader 2006, United Nations 1995). Generally speaking, an overall heightened awareness of the complexity and multidimensional nature of human health is emerging, in which spirituality is being recognized as an important and valid health-related variable. Still, a major challenge is agreeing on whether spirituality is a part of health, or merely an influence (Larson 1996). This will be a recurrent topic throughout this thesis.

1.3 Research Question

Although there is a relatively solid base of evidence establishing a relationship between spirituality and health, there is still a need for more information regarding *how* spirituality functionally affects health and wellbeing (Rosmarin, Wachholtz & Ai 2011). This study investigates the spirituality-health relationship through in-depth descriptions of subjective experiences. By allowing the dynamics of the spirituality-health relationship to emerge through an open-ended approach, the present study seeks to identify some of the mechanisms underlying the spirituality-health connection. An explanatory approach, sensitive to the diversity and nuances in the experience of the phenomenon, is applied. Hence, the present study is guided by the following research question:

How do women who define themselves as spiritual experience spirituality as relevant for health and wellbeing?

The experience of the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing is explored through the following sub-questions: What is the participants' perception of spirituality? How do the participants experience spirituality? And, how do they account for the influence of spirituality

on their health and wellbeing? These sub-questions ensure the inclusion of both perceptions and experiences, which is necessary to convey an exhaustive description of the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing.

1.3.1 Contribution

This study illustrates the meaning of spirituality on a personal level. The goal is to provide new knowledge about the *lived experience* of spirituality as it relates to health and wellbeing in daily living. Moreover, the findings may provide societal benefits, such as indicators for future directions in research and new information, which may be of value within health-care services or other social sectors. The present study may also be a source of insight for others in the general-public who might dwell on existential questions.

1.4 Overview of the Content

Chapter 1 introduces the background for- and purpose of this study. The remainder of the thesis is comprised of four chapters: **Chapter 2** is a review of literature related to the phenomenon. This chapter is divided into two parts; the first part provides an overview of previous research, and is designed to draw attention to the complexity associated with the spirituality-health relationship. The second part of this chapter presents a selection of relevant theories that may help shed light on the underlying mechanisms linking spirituality to health. **Chapter 3** describes the methodological approach, which includes an overview of the research design, an outline of the Epoché process and reflections of the role of the researcher, as well as procedures for data collection, data analysis and the quality of study. **Chapter 4** presents the themes and subthemes generated from the phenomenological data analysis, while **Chapter 5** discusses the findings, limitations and future directions for research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter is a review of literature relevant for understanding the spirituality-health linkage. The literature review consists of two sections: previous research and theoretical perspectives. In the first section, I present a general overview of both positive and negative connections between religion/spirituality and health, as well as a selection of findings from the meaning-making and coping literature. The section proceeds with a closer look at distinctions between spiritual orientations and their implications for health, limitations and objections to the study of spirituality, as well as the literature's recommendations for future research. The second section introduces the theoretical framework applied for interpreting the data, and flows through the following sections: social construction of reality, transcendence and human nature, transcendent experiences, transcendent actualization, spiritual health, and sense of coherence.

2.1 Previous Research

The research field covering the relationship between spirituality and health is diverse and saturated with ambiguity - mainly due to the elusive nature of spirituality, and the lack of consensual conceptual definitions (Coyle 2002). Most of the research findings are rooted in measures of religiosity (Williams & Sternthal 2007), and because of the long history of viewing religion and spirituality as overlapping constructs - spirituality, religion and religiousness (R/S) are frequently used interchangeably in the literature (Thoresen & Harris 2002).

2.1.1 A General Overview of Positive Associations

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence available proposing that there is a positive relationship between religion/spirituality and health. Together, the two editions of the *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Koenig et al. 2012) review the results from over 3,300 quantitative studies conducted prior to 2010. Additionally, a numerous amount of qualitative studies exist that were not included in the reviews. Religious and spiritual factors are associated with a variety of outcomes and indicators of health and wellbeing across physical, mental and social dimensions. Although the summarized findings of the studies presented in the two editions of the Handbook indicate that R/S is predominantly beneficial for health and

wellbeing, a minor number of studies show mixed findings, no correlation or a negative correlation between R/S and health (Koenig et al. 2012).

The most striking evidence of a positive influence of R/S on health is found in studies examining physical outcomes (Koenig et al. 2012). Frequently highlighted findings suggest that R/S involvement is associated with: lower rates of coronary heart disease, lower blood pressure, less prevalence of stroke and most cancers, as well as less use of medical services, better self-perceived health. R/S has also been connected to an improvement in physical functioning after surgery, and better cognitive functioning in the elderly and people with dementia (Koenig et al. 2012, Powell, Shahabi & Thoresen 2003, Musick, Traphagen, Koenig 2002, 2012, Sørensen, Danbolt, Lien, Koenig & Holmen 2011, Thoresen & Harris 2002). Studies of mortality even claim that people adhering to R/S show higher survival rates and increased longevity. In these studies, the “frequency of attendance at religious services” seems to be the most important predictor of mortality (Koenig 2002, Thoresen 1999, Music et al. 2000). However, there is growing evidence that other types of spiritual practices (e.g. Zen, yoga and meditation) has a direct beneficial impact on health-related physiological processes as well. The strongest results are found in randomized interventional trials on meditation, primarily transcendental meditation (Seeman, Dubin & Seeman 2003:53). Additionally, Powell et al. (2003) refer to rather controversial findings from three studies suggesting that “being prayed for improves the recovery of acute illness” (p. 48). These studies were, however, far from flawless, and more well-controlled trials are needed to clarify whether being prayed for may indeed influence health outcomes.

Koenig (2002, 2012) explains that the relationship between religion/spirituality on physical health is most likely rooted in the influence of R/S on mental health, social support and health behaviours. Science has established a link between mental and physical health, which indicate that improving mental health significantly reduces the chance of developing both mental and physical illness (Seligman 2008). Seligman (2008) emphasizes that good mental health requires, not just the absence of mental illness, but also a certain level of life-satisfaction. He lists positive emotion, engagement, meaning and purpose, positive relationships and positive accomplishments, as fundamental predictors of a lack of depression, higher achievement *and* better physical health (Seligman 2008, 2011).

The vast majority of the research on spirituality, and religion and health involves studies on mental health (Koenig 2012). Findings generally convey that R/S improves mental health

through increased happiness, optimism, hope and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. And likewise, that R/S is related to a less prevalence of negative emotions and symptoms of mental illness, such as depression, suicide ideation, anxiety and substance abuse (Thoresen 1999, Hadzic 2011, Koenig 2009, Koenig & Larson 2001, Koenig 2010, 2012). This predominantly positive relationship between R/S and mental health appear to be consistent across studies with samples from different age groups (Wong, Rew & Slaikeu 2006). However, existing evidence indicates that the relationship between R/S and mental health grows stronger with age, and that various aspects of R/S differ in the level of importance across age and gender. For example, while both institutional (e.g. church attendance) and personal (e.g. prayer and level of commitment) R/S factors seem to be important predictors of adolescent mental health, personal devotion measures show the strongest influence on mental health in adult samples. Research also suggests that R/S may be more beneficial for males and older adolescents than females and younger adolescents (pp. 176-177).

Furthermore, literature show that religion and spirituality is highly influential of factors pertaining to social wellbeing. This includes increased social support, better social integration, increased social capital, and better performance in school, as well as less criminal and antisocial behaviour (Koenig 2012). Especially participation in religious activities seem to provide people with greater networks, as well as more contact with friends and family and improved quality in relationships (Koenig 2012, Musick et al. 2000). However, findings from a recent study of religiousness and social support in Norway (N=653) contradicts this overwhelmingly positive association found in previous studies. Here, non-religious older adults (60-75) expressed having more social support than those who identified as religious. No relationship was found between religiousness and social support among the middle age group (40-59). However, in the youngest age group (18-39), religious men reported more tangible and emotional support than non-religious men, while this was reversed in the female sample of the same age group. The authors (Kvande, Reidunsdatter, Løhre, Nielsen & Espnes 2014) deem it likely that the effects of religion decreases for women because they have a more diverse social context to draw support from than men. If men have fewer emotional bonds with other people than women, it explains why religious contexts may be an especially important source of social support for men (p. 103).

Additionally, characteristic of both religion and spirituality is the promotion of certain behaviours, which serve as guidelines for optimal living (George et al. 2000). Research confirms that R/S involvement fosters greater marital stability, better diets and more physical

activity. More generally, religious people tend to report lower alcohol consumption, drug use, and cigarette smoking, and are more inclined to avoid potentially harmful activities, such as driving under the influence of alcohol, not wear seat belts and engage in risky sexual behaviours (Musick et al. 2000, Koenig 2012, George et al. 2000). Thus, perceived social support and health behaviours are pathways through which R/S may influence both mental and physical health (Spinale et al. 2008, Koenig 2012).

2.1.2 Unhealthy Spirituality

Although literature mostly portray religion and spirituality as beneficial for health, there is no shortage of negative connections between R/S and health. Especially the fields of psychiatry and psychology has as a long history of linking religious and spiritual factors to symptoms of mental disturbance. Hence, there are many studies available proposing that religious and spiritual people tend to be more perfectionistic, insecure, angry, depressed, stressed, worried, dependent, intolerant and inflexible (Koenig & Larson 2001, Miller & Thoresen 2003). R/S beliefs has also been described as a hindrance to recovery. King, Speck and Thomas (1994) found that stronger spiritual beliefs negatively influenced the outcome of patients recovering from acute physical illness. These results were replicated in another study investigating the clinical outcome of patients nine months after hospital admission (King, Speck & Thomas 1999). Why did spiritual beliefs seem to hinder recovery? The authors explain that people, regardless of faith, respond differently to being diagnosed with illness. There is also a possibility that those with a worse prognosis may have been more focused on spiritual matters, and thus reported stronger spiritual beliefs than those with a less severe condition. Another possibility is that a strong spiritual conviction may result in less fear of death, and thus less strive or desire for survival (King et al. 1994:635).

Some people are definitely more exposed, and likely, to develop serious physical and psychological problems related to certain R/S beliefs and practices. Especially potent is the framing of R/S beliefs within strict authoritarian contexts, which may use R/S as means to justify potentially harmful sanctions, such as physical punishments, ridicule and shaming to ensure social conformity (Thoresen & Harris 2002:9). More severe ramifications of destructive religious/spiritual convictions are illustrated by acts such as suicide bombings, sectarian mass suicides, sexual abuse by spiritual leaders or parents who reject medical treatment for their children because of their religious convictions (Koenig et. al 2012, Miller & Thoresen 2003). Another major concern is the combination of religious delusion and

serious mental illness; psychotic patients who take religious scripture literally may inflict serious harm to themselves and/or others (Koenig et al. 2012). An extreme example of this (McLellan 2006) is the tragic story of Andrea Yates who drowned her five children due to her personal conviction that she was marked by Satan. She claimed that the motivation for killing her children was an attempt to save them from going to hell. In Andrea's case, there was a long history of hallucination combined with unconventional and (fundamentalist) religious beliefs (pp. 1951-1952).

Hill and Pargament (2008) explain that religious and spiritual struggles are potentially harmful stressors because they confront the most vulnerable aspects of life, namely, people's existential foundation. R/S struggles could manifest in several ways; as internal or intrapersonal conflict, as well as struggles with God or the Transcendent. Either way, these struggles may cause pervasive feelings of doubt, disillusionment and distrust in relation to oneself, significant others and/or the transcendent (p.10). Accordingly, research indicates that spiritual struggles are linked to psychopathologic symptoms, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, paranoid ideation, obsessive-compulsiveness and somatization (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison & Flannelly 2006). It is, however, important to recognize that the adverse effects of R/S often emerge as the result of a combination of factors. This complexity is well illustrated in the Yates tragedy where a synthesis of "odd family dynamics, fundamentalist religious beliefs, clinical care that was fragmented at the best, and the quirks and inadequacies of the American-insurance system" (McLellan 2006:1951) led a mother to drown all her children. Another essential question, is whether R/S beliefs actually contributes to a poorer mental and physical health, or if there is a higher chance of people becoming religious and spiritual during times of illness. More well-controlled studies are needed to fully understand the complexity of all aspects mediating the spirituality-health relationship (Thoresen & Harris 2002, Koenig et al. 2012).

2.1.3 Coping with Stress

Since research identified *stress* as a major influence of health and wellbeing (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkmann & Lazarus 1982), there has been a massive growth in the focus on stress-management, also conceptualized as coping (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub 1989). Koenig et al. (2012) define coping as "learning how to live with adversity and thrive despite it" (p. 75). The authors presume that the role of religion/spirituality in coping with stress is perhaps the primary pathway through which R/S influence health and wellbeing. The general

idea is that by improving people's coping skills, R/S buffers the mental and emotional impact of stress, which in return protects against the development of both mental and physical illnesses (Koenig et al. 2012, Koenig 2002).

R/S coping has been connected to improved health and wellbeing in the face of a wide array of major life stressors (Pargament, Koenig and Perez 2000), including illness (Gordon et al. 2002, Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, N, & Hanh 2004), recovery from surgery (Harris et al. 1995), war (Pargament et al. 1994) and the death of a loved one (Park & Cohen 1993). Also, findings from several studies on chronic pain suggest that R/S coping leads to greater pain tolerance, which enables "patients to continue functioning with their daily activities despite elevated pain levels" (Wachholtz, Pearce & Koenig 2007:313). Moreover, literature suggests that R/S coping has positively influenced the mental health of inmates (Allen, Phillips, Roff, Cavanaugh & Day 2008), is an important factor in caregiving for people suffering from illness and/or disability (Chang, Noonan & Tennstedt 1998, Smith & Harkness 2002), and promotes resilience in both adolescents (Kim & Esquivel 2011) and the elderly (Manning 2012).

As demonstrated by extensive research, there is little doubt that religion and spirituality are highly important for many people across the world, and offers multiple resources for coping with life altering events (Koenig et al. 2012). Although prayer and faith in God are highlighted as two of the most widespread and applied coping resources (Graham, Furr, Flowers & Burke 2001), R/S coping may also include an active search for meaning, spiritual support (both from transcendent sources and clergy), forgiveness, comfort, connectedness/intimacy, purification, life transformation, and spiritual approaches to control (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez 1998, Pargament et al. 2000). Qualitative studies on chronically ill patients have shown that religion and spirituality improve patients' coping skills by providing hope, strength and security (Gordon, Feldman, Crose, Schoen & Shankar 2002, Narayanasamy 2003). Wilding (2007), who interviewed six patients from community mental health centres in Australia, reports that spirituality promotes an increased sense of meaning, hope, support, and a reason to live. Participants also expressed that spirituality was a crucial source of motivation to participate in everyday activities. Spirituality, Wilding (2007) concludes, "was found to be a life-sustaining phenomenon" (p. 67). An interesting notification made by Narayanasamy (2004) is that many patients deliberately hide their spiritual beliefs and practices from others, including nurses, due to a fear of being ridiculed

(p. 116). A relevant question that emerges in relation to that is: how does that [the need to conceal aspects of oneself] impact coping?

Although many studies show that R/S provides vital resources for coping with major life events, it might be even more important to consider the influence of the stress and strains of everyday living (DeLongis et al. 1982). “Daily hassles” refer to the minor demands and challenging experiences people encounter on a daily basis. This can be traffic problems, relationship issues, time pressure, work-related stress, financial worries etc. Some of these stressors appear briefly, while others reoccur on a more regular basis, and may turn into chronic strains. Research suggests a significant impact of daily hassles on psychological wellbeing and somatic illness, and some studies show an even stronger link between daily hassles and somatic health than with major life changes (Lazarus & DeLongis 1983, DeLongis et al. 1982). Studies on the relationship between R/S and minor stressors show contradictory results, while some indicate that religion and spirituality prevents the negative impact of daily stressors (Kim & Seidlitz 2002) others found no association with R/S and daily stress (Plante, Saucedo, Rice 2001). Plante et al. (2001) explain that the relationship between R/S and coping usually strengthens as the intensity of the stress increases (p. 298).

The role of religion and spirituality in providing meaning is often highlighted as a key coping resource. A central reason for this is that R/S helps people to place their lives within a larger context, and enables them “to look beyond the experience at hand” (Fischer, Fialkowsky, Stewart-Sicking, Oakes & Gillespie 2015:4). In literature, the ability to create meaning is portrayed as a defining feature of the human organism (Berger & Luckmann 1966, Luckmann 1967), which is essential for adjustment to situations, and for obtaining a sense of coherence in life despite various external and internal stimuli (Park & Folkman 1997, Antonovsky 2000). The diverse role of R/S in meaning-making and coping is illustrated in a qualitative study conducted by Mattis (2002). By interviewing a sample of African-American women (n=23), she found that R/S influenced meaning-making and coping in a way that helped the women to:

Interrogate and accept the reality of their circumstances; identify, confront and transcend limitations; engage in spiritual surrender; identify and grapple with existential questions and life lessons; recognize their own purpose and destiny (and the purpose of others’ lives); act in principled ways; achieve growth and accept transcendent sources of knowledge” (Mattis 2002:317).

In another qualitative study, Bacchus and Holley (2005) found that spirituality had buffered the impact of work-related stress by providing a sense of protection and personal strength. Spirituality was also a significant source of guidance, both in general and for problem-solving - one participant described this as having a “spiritual compass” (p. 76). A recurrent experience was that spirituality helped the women to redefine and decide whether to accept negative situations.

Furthermore, a noteworthy development is the striking interest in spiritually-based interventions. Programmes such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) are now frequently being applied in medical settings and other public health arenas (Bishop 2002). MBSR is a meditation programme derived from Buddhist teachings, which has proven to be an effective tool for stress reduction and the promotion of psychological wellbeing. This applies both to healthy and sick people (Rajagopal, MacKenzie, Bailey & Lavizzo-Mourey 2002, Shapiro, Austin, Bishop & Cordova 2005). Kristeller (2010) explains that although MBSR is defined to be a secular stress-reduction programme, evidence suggests that:

Meditative practices that explicitly engage spiritual themes will have positive effects on this aspect of people’s experience, enriching their sense of meaning, helping to cultivate well-being, and contributing to a sense of connectedness to others and to a wider field of being (Kristeller 2010:175).

In accordance with this, a study conducted on a relatively large sample (N=279) of mentally stressed adults found a direct relationship between an increase in daily spiritual experiences and enhanced mindfulness. In return, this enhanced sense of mindfulness was significantly related to improvement in mental health (Greeson et al. 2011). Tuck, Alleyne and Thinganjana (2006) examined spirituality and stress reduction in healthy adults through a programme called SPIRIT 6. Several spiritual domains, including both cognitive and experiential components of spirituality was explored. This intervention was success in reducing the participants stress levels, and the authors conclude that spirituality has “a significant influence on the health of individuals” (p. 252).

2.1.4 Spiritual Distinctions and Implications for Health

There are numerous ways of being religious and spiritual, which makes it plausible to assume that variations between religiousness and spirituality profiles may be diversely related to health and wellbeing (Park et al. 2011, Osborne & Vandenberg 2003). Although relatively little research has been conducted on spirituality in the absence of a religious framework

(Thoresen & Harris 2002), existing indicators suggest that those who claim to be “spiritual, but not religious” show more symptoms of mental disorders (e.g. dependence on drugs and excessive drinking, abnormal eating, anxiety and neurosis) than those who are religious, and those without any religious or spiritual affiliation (King et al. 2013). In a coping study on American graduate students in counselling, Graham et al. (2001) found that both religion and spirituality improved the students coping abilities, but those who were spiritual within a religious framework reported greater spiritual health and had a higher tolerance for stress than those who identified as spiritual, but not religious (p. 2).

According to Granquist, Ivarsson, Broberg and Hagekull (2007), people’s religious and spiritual preferences may be rooted in the way they relate to their parents. Evidence from a Swedish sample (n=102) suggests that those with a history of parental rejection and role reversal are more drawn to New Age spirituality, whereas those with a secure attachment and sensitive parents are more likely to embrace the religion of their parents. New Age beliefs were also associated with “emotional turmoil and unresolved states of mind” (p. 597). Granquist et al. (2007) explain these correlations the following way: “just as experiences from inconsistent and role-reversing parenting lead to preoccupation with attachment, the New Age movement is hypothesized to attract preoccupied individuals by sanctioning their beliefs, and encouraging their expression of preoccupation” (p. 598). In other words, modern spirituality is a channel which allows the adult to express unresolved childhood experiences, but also sustains these unhealthy cognitive and emotional patterns.

Farias, Underwood and Claridge (2013) challenge this presumed negative relationship between modern spirituality and mental health. They refer to evidence showing that modern spiritual believers are just as mentally healthy as traditional believers, if not more so. And, that both traditional and modern spiritual ideas about life after death seem to alleviate death anxiety. The authors theorize that the social acceptance of magical and paranormal thinking within spiritual contexts might make it easier to cope with unusual ideation and perceptual experiences (pp. 365-366). This is in accordance with Kohls, Walach and Wirtz (2009) suggestion that spiritual practice (which is equivalent of embracing a spiritual framework) is an important protective factor for mental health because it moderates the effect of both positive and disturbing spiritual experiences. In Farias et al.’s (2013) study, opposite from the findings reported by Granquist et al. (2007), modern spirituality was unrelated to an insecure attachment style. Additionally, both spiritual and religious believers reported similarly high rates of self-perceived social support. Farias et al. (2013) suspect that the discrepancies in the

research results are rooted in differences in sampling procedures; contrary to the limited samples used in previous research, they gathered information from a much wider sample in their study, which included greater cultural and spiritual variety (p. 376). These diverse findings highlight the importance of more research on different spiritual and religious profiles in order to clarify the distinction between religious and spiritual factors and their specific implications for health and wellbeing (Thoresen & Harris 2002).

2.1.5 Limitations and Objections

Analyses of the empirical evidence linking religion/spirituality to health consistently address a number of methodological shortcomings in the literature (Thoresen 1999, Miller & Thoresen 2003, Hill & Pargament 2008). Religion and spirituality has seldom been the primary topic of investigation, and R/S variables have often been added to studies examining other topics. Therefore, research on R/S and health is often based on a few (or single-item) and imprecise global measurements (Hill & Pargament 2008:5). Other limitations concern a high preponderance of cross-sectional and correlational studies, unsuitable study designs, a lack of sampling diversity, few longitudinal studies, as well a lack of a theoretical framework to understand the empirical findings (Berry 2005, Klaassen, McDonald & James 2006, Miller & Thoresen 2003, Thoresen 1999). It has also been claimed that many studies are misrepresented in the literature as being significant for health outcomes, when in reality no such effects were demonstrated (Sloan and Bagiella 2002, Sloan 2006)

Sloan and co-authors (e.g. Sloan, Bagiella & Powell 1999, Sloan & Bagiella 2002, Sloan et al. 2000, Sloan, 2005, 2006) consistently use these shortcomings not only to dispute the empirical evidence, but also oppose the scientific study of religion and spirituality altogether. Spirituality *cannot* be studied scientifically because of its “immaterial and unempirical” nature - “hypotheses based on supernatural explanations cannot be scientific, because they can never be disconfirmed” (Sloan 2006:45). Ethical concerns related to incorporating R/S in public health care, along with the incompatibility of science and R/S approaches to knowledge and truth, makes a strong case for why it *should not* be studied scientifically. Ethical objections claim that the use of R/S by health care providers represents a serious breach of privacy which may be experienced as deeply insulting to patients. There is also a possibility of misuse by health professional, such as the coercion of patients, religious discrimination or proselytizing (Koenig et al. 2000, Sloan & VandeCreek 2000, Sloan 2006). Another argument by Sloan (2006) is that scientific studies of R/S trivializes the

religious/spiritual aspect of life, and thus indicates that R/S needs scientific methods to prove its legitimacy. He asks: “Even if we could, hypothetically, demonstrate that Protestant prayer is better for one’s health than Catholic prayer, why would we ever want to do so?” (p. 259).

Miller and Thoresen (2003) counter-argue that: “the investigation of spiritual/religious factors in health is clearly warranted and clinically relevant” (p. 24). Science has a long history of studying phenomena that are not directly observable, such as complex cognitive processes, emotional states and the inner workings of psychotherapy. Moreover, there is no restriction within the scientific method as far as what *should* and *should not* be studied. These are ethical questions which pertain to the values of the researcher, not the philosophical underpinnings of science (p. 25).

2.1.6 Future Directions for Research

Scholars (e.g. Williams & Sternthal 2007, Hill & Pargament 2008, Thoresen & Harris 2002, George et al. 2000) identify several research needs in the study of spirituality, including a clarification of conceptual definitions of spirituality and religiousness, the further development of measurement instruments and methodological pluralism. Hill and Pargament (2008) highlight the need for new research to be more sensitive to cultural diversity, and better adapted to capture the dynamic qualities of religion and spirituality. This includes the “possibility of change, growth, deterioration, or stability in the religious and spiritual life across time and situations” (p. 12). Williams and Sternthal (2007) underscore the importance of a deeper understanding of *how* R/S affects health, and point to the lack of attention directed towards the extent to which R/S can provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Also, as mentioned above, literature is void of studies examining spirituality defined as separate from religion (p. 49).

According to George et al. (2000), there is a pressing need for more research that examines the content and conditions of spiritual experiences. The influence of spiritual experiences, defined by the authors as “a transcendent sense of being in direct touch with the sacred” (p. 112), is highly unexplored, and there is limited knowledge available about the influence of spiritual experiences in the nexus between R/S involvement and health. Likewise, Kohls and Walach (2008) underscore the need for research to distinguish between practices, attitudes and experiences, as these aspects may be diversely related to health. Accordingly, a study by Kohls et al. (2009) revealed that spiritual experiences may be more important for health enhancement than attitudes or beliefs. Similarly, Levin and Steele (2005) refers to evidence

which demonstrate that spiritual experiences have significantly improved health outcomes, including the remission of pathological conditions and positive neurophysiological outcomes. However, the authors underscore that previous research' linking of spiritual experiences, psychosis and affective disorder should not be ignored - although some truly spiritual experiences have been misinterpreted as symptoms of mental disorders, it is equally important to recognize that not all experiences of spiritual phenomena manifest themselves as desirable (pp. 95-96). Moreover, findings reported by Kvande, Klöckner and Nielsen (2015) indicate that religious/spiritual experiences have a greater impact on women's wellbeing than men's, while participation church attendance is of greater influence on men's wellbeing. However, more studies are needed on gender differences in the relationship between various R/S factors and health (p. 11).

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Since the primary concern of phenomenology is to uncover the essential *meaning* of subjective experiences (Gallagher 2012, Creswell 2007), a theoretical framework to interpret the data that connects spirituality to meaning-making processes was chosen. Meaning and purpose are essential themes relevant for all approaches to spirituality, and has specific benefits for health and wellbeing (Coyle 2002, Mattis 2002). This section opens by highlighting the relevance of viewing the meaning of spirituality in relation to social processes. Together with Luckmann's theory of transcendence, the social constructionist framework elaborates on the interlinking between sociality, spirituality and meaning. The concept of transcendent experiences is included for the purpose of understanding this unique class of experiences commonly associated with spirituality. The last three sections, which introduce Maslow's concept of transcendent actualization, Antonovsky's theory of sense of coherence and the concept of spiritual health, provide a more specific lens for understanding the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing in daily living.

2.2.1 Social Construction of Reality

This study focuses on the meaning-making aspects of people's lived experiences with spirituality, and is therefore conducted from within the social constructivist framework. Social constructivism explores the social aspects of human reality, and pays particular attention to the way that social order (understandings, meanings, norms, roles and rules) is produced

through interactivity (Forster 2006, Creswell 2007). Social constructivism is a general term that covers several alternative approaches to the study of human beings and their social contexts (Burr 2015), and is depicted by Lock and Strong (2010) as a broad church held together by some expansive tenets (p. 6). Central is a critical stance towards established, taken-for-granted, knowledge, and the historical and cultural relativity of social reality. This means that all human meanings and understandings are essentially products of human interaction, and the specific social contexts from which they emerged. The focus is not on finding the “true” nature of things, but to understand how knowledge is continuously shaped and maintained through daily interactions between individuals. Social constructivism also holds that social reality and social action are deeply intertwined because the different perceptions of the world always correspond with the sustenance and rejection of certain types of behaviour (Burr 2015).

Berger and Luckmann’s book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), is one of the greatest influences of social constructivism (Gergen 1994). The book provides a thorough analysis of the social processes that create and sustain everyday human reality. The main argument is that these processes reflect a dialectical relationship between the individual and society, and is composed of three moments: externalization (society is a human product), objectivation (society is an objective reality) and internalization (man is a social product). Thus, society consists of both a subjective and objective reality (Berger & Luckmann 1966:79).

Externalization is basically human action. That is, “the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and mental activity of men” (Berger 1969:4).

Objectivation refers to the products that emerge as a result of this repetitive human activity, and which ensures that specific meanings become an integrated part of both the individual and social/collective consciousness. The objective aspect of social reality is rather paradoxical in that people actually create a world that is experienced as something other than a human product. It appears to the person as a natural and external facticity with a life of its own. The most fundamental tool for maintaining the objectivations of everyday life is *language*.

Language lies at the core of human interaction. It functions as a kind of “objective repository” (p. 52) of accumulated meaning and experience, which is available for people across time.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain how language strengthens individuals’ subjectivity of both themselves and their communication partner:

I objectivate my own being through means of language, my own being becomes massively and continuously available to myself at the same time it is available to him, and I can spontaneously respond to it without the “interruption” of deliberate reflection. It can, therefore, be said that language makes “more real” my subjectivity not only to my conversation partner but also to myself. This ability of language to crystallize and stabilize for me my own subjectivity is retained (albeit with modifications) as language is detached from the face-to-face situation (Berger & Luckmann 1966:52-53).

Language then, is essential for confirming one’s place in existence, and for developing meaningful relationships with others. *Internalization* refers to the process by which objectivations are passed on and sustained through socialization. Human beings are born with a distinct openness to the world - a “predisposition towards sociality” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:149), which is necessary for social programming. Social programming begins immediately when the child is born. As the child systematically integrates the roles and attitudes of significant others into his/her own subjective system, a specific internal frame of reference for future interpretations of life is established. It is through this adopting of ideas and behaviours of other people, that the structures of the objective world become structures of the subjective consciousness. Internalization is the central mechanism for the development of an understanding of others, and for perceiving the world as a meaningful and social reality. This process also ensures that the people’s worldview is compatible with that of their surrounding social community. When the objective and the subjective worlds are in tune, socialization has succeeded. However, it is an ongoing challenge to synchronise the objective world out there, with the inner world of the subjective Self (Berger & Luckmann 1966, Berger 1969).

This dialectic “balancing act” between subjective and objective reality entails that social reality is vulnerable. That is, the same structure that provides the individual with a sense of stability is essentially unstable and inherently predestined to change (Berger 1969). The institutional world is therefore dependent on a continuous legitimation of its interpretation of reality. Legitimation is depicted as a “second order objectivation of meaning” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:110), and although legitimation is conveyed on different levels, it is basically a system of justification. It provides the people with an explanation as to *why* things are the way they are, and thus helps to sustain the current order (Berger & Luckmann 1966). According to Berger (1969), religious belief systems are especially successful tools of legitimation because they convey a promise of an Ultimate reality, existing independently of the uncertain reality constructions of human activity (p. 32). Since the Western world has been evolving towards

an increased institutionalized differentiation and role specialization, a web of sub-universes of meaning has emerged (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Through these processes, religion has been transformed from a collective enterprise into a more subtle, subjective and private reality (Luckmann 1967:86). The individual is no longer bound to one official unified cosmology of existential meaning, but must select and compose meaning through the many, and often conflicting, theories available (Luckmann 1967).

Social constructivism is thus a useful theoretical framework for understanding the role of spirituality in people's everyday lives. Considering that spirituality, regardless of definitions, will always be experienced and expressed within a social context (Zinnbauer et al. 1999:903), I find it essential to acknowledge the interactive dynamics involved in the meaning ascribed to the participants' experiences.

2.2.2 Human Nature and Transcendence

The value placed on spirituality for health and wellbeing is culturally contingent and closely related to the prevailing understanding of *human nature* (Morris 1994). Morris (1994) refers to cross-cultural data which indicate that the human person is commonly conceptualized through four dimensions: a material, a social, an individual and a spiritual dimension. Although different cultures put a varying emphasis on the different dimensions, many cultures view the material and the spiritual as profoundly interconnected aspects of the human person (p. 196). Since it appears that spirituality is becoming increasingly recognized as a “real” phenomenon in the scientific-oriented parts of the world (Fisher 2011, Gilbert 2007), I consider it relevant to address the *possibility* of a spiritual essence intertwined with the biological, individual and social aspects of the human person.

An important sociological contribution that connects these four dimensions is found in Thomas Luckmann's (1967) book, *The Invisible Religion*. The book accounts for the transformation of religion, from a public to a private matter, in modern society. A central argument in the book is that religion is not equivalent to religious institutions. Rather, religion must be understood in terms of the phenomenon from which religious institutions emerge. Through an analysis of the anthropological conditions underpinning religious institutions, Luckmann concludes that the origin of religion rests in the experience of transcendence. In the *Invisible Religion*, transcendence is described as a “series of recurrent processes of transcending the borders of existential conditions” (Karlsaune 2001:6).

This conclusion is basically an answer to the question of what makes the human being human. Consistent with the thinking presented in *The Social Construction of Reality*, Luckmann (1967) bases the formation of the human Self in the social world of face-to-face interaction. The human being, he argues, needs other human beings to become human. Without fellow human beings, the organism will remain at an animalistic level, driven purely by primal instincts. Through encounters with others, the individual is able to detach from the stream of its own experiences and develop the ability to take an external point of view. The *I* becomes *Me* through meeting *You*, so to speak. This “detachment” from self that takes place in interaction, occurs through a transcendence of biological nature. This is the fundamental conditioning of human nature – a prerequisite for the transformation from animal to man. Luckmann (1967) states that: “It is in keeping with an elementary sense of the concept of religion to call the transcendence of the biological nature by the human organism a religious phenomenon” (p. 49). Thus, the interactive processes (externalization, objectivation and externalization) that lead to the formation of the self are essentially religious. The organism becomes *human* and creates a meaningful environment by the means of a (invisible) religious dimension, which is realized through social interaction (Karlsaune 2001).

It is important to remember that Luckmann (1967) searched for the human conditions of that which may be institutionalized as religion. Because religion emerges as a product of human world-building, how could it ever be anything other than inherently human? It follows that the origin of religion is revealed by uncovering the driving force of human development. The link between the everyday activity of human beings, and the transcendent realms depicted by religion, is found in the many layers of transcendence. Luckmann (1990b) distinguishes between three main levels of transcendence - small, intermediate and great transcendences. “Small” transcendences refer to everyday transcendences that are taken for granted. This involves the appearance of objects in our consciousness, and how they are perceived. “Intermediate” transcendences are interpersonal experiences, and the direct experience of something (e.g. the body of a person), which refer to something that cannot be directly experienced (e.g. that person’s inner life). “Great” transcendences point to realities that are not a part of the visible world, and cannot be experienced directly through ordinary perception (Luckmann 1990b:129, Fuglseth 2009).

When defined in terms of transcendence, the religious dimension is detached from the specific meaning-hierarchies conveyed by religious institutions, rather, it exceeds the limits of biology as a fundamental essence of sociality (Luckmann 1967). Ruschmann (2011) explains that

transcending processes are basically “means of constituting meaning, expanding the realm of the individual, using existing value systems or even generating new kinds of values” (p. 427). From this perspective, seeing religion as transcendence implies that religion is essentially *meaning-making* (Besecke 2005), and thus meaning-making is religion.

For some, Luckmann’s perspective is both controversial and provocative (Karlsaune 2001). Even his companion, Peter Berger (1974), criticizes his functionalistic approach, calling it a legitimization of a secularized worldview which “flattens out” the specificity of the religious phenomenon (pp. 128-129). Regardless of the legitimacy of such objections, and for the purposes of this study, Luckmann’s approach provides a relevant illustration of how the different dimensions of human experience may be conceived of as intertwined; the great transcendences that enable us to ponder about our own death and the mystery of existence is merely a continuation of the minor transcendences of everyday living, as they are actualized by the same mechanism.

2.2.3 Transcendent Experiences

Transcendent experiences are essential to all religions and spiritual disciplines, and the origin of most supernatural and theistic belief systems (Waldron 1998:103). Transcendent experience is a term covering a range of “unusual” experiences that are profoundly difficult to grasp and describe. Accounts of transcendent experiences are found in both religious/spiritual and secular literature from all cultures across the world, in old as well as new writings (Levin & Steele 2005:89). As such, it is a universal phenomenon, not limited to certain faith traditions or extraordinary people. This is reflected in the many names that have been proposed for this type of experiences (e.g. transcendental experience, religious experience, spiritual experience, mystical experience, cosmic consciousness, peak experience, core religious experience, ecstasy, satori, transpersonal experience, near-death experience, flow experience). These labels capture a wide variety of transcendence experiences, but despite differences, they all refer in some way to a significant shift in consciousness; a multisensory, often life changing, elevation or expansion of one’s awareness (Levin & Steele 2005, Waldron 1998).

Levin and Steele (2005) outline several physiological models derived from a variety of theoretical and scientific perspectives attempting to explain the nature of transcendent experiences. While some (Green & Green 1985) acknowledge the existence of a human self

beyond the physical, and suggests that the brain may function as a mediator through which one's physical body can gain access to this higher order of existence. Others, for example Mandell (1989) and Persinger (1987), have described transcendent experiences as a strictly biological phenomenon (often referring to *God in the brain*), thereby reducing transcendent experiences to levels of serotonin in the hippocampus area of the temporal lobe. However, a more total and holistic picture is emerging as more recent models pursue an understanding of transcendent experiences in the nexus between psychological and biological dimensions of the human person (Levin & Steele 2005).

The phenomenon of the transcendent experience is thoroughly described in the classical writings of psychologists William James (1990/1902) and Abraham Maslow (1964). While James used the term "core religious experience", Maslow coined the term "peak experience". In the writings of both authors, transcendent experiences are classified as a biological and psychological condition of human nature, and they explain that although the cognitive interpretation (theories) surrounding such experiences may differ between individuals and cultures across time and space, transcendent experiences seem to manifest similar feelings and actions in individuals regardless of differing social contexts (James 1990/1902, Maslow 1964). James (1990/1902) underscores that these are experiences from which humanity's most valued beliefs and ideals have emerged, which testifies to the importance of not underestimating the impact of such experiences on people's lives. Although invisible to the naked eye, the spiritual region of consciousness must be recognized as a valid part of reality - because it produces *real* effects in the material world. The experience of transcendent connectedness impacts people's personality and affects their interaction in the physical world (p. 461). Both James (1990/1902) and Maslow (1964) highlights the powerful and transforming potential of transcendent experiences. In particular, the spontaneous experience of the universe as one unified and integrated whole, and the profound sense of union with the Absolute (also commonly referred to as the Transcendent/Ultimate Reality/God), can be such a dramatic experience that it can permanently change the person's character and worldview.

In their review of studies on transcendent experiences, Levin and Steele (2005) identify two broad sub-types of the transcendent experience, categorized as a "green type" and a "mature type". The green type is described as transitory with powerful desirable sensations. This is similar to Maslow's (1964) description of peak experiences as such uplifting moments that they come close to euphoria, ecstasy, and a sense of total bliss. Maslow (1964) associated peak experiences with optimal inner health because they trigger positive emotions, such as

“wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender and even worship before the greatness of the experience” (p. 65). Peak experiences can also be felt as so great that they give meaning and value to life by their occasional appearance. Central is a more complete understanding and acceptance of the world as it is. Also, peak experiences often promote a sense of being more aligned with one’s true self, and of being more deeply integrated and overall fully functioning, as well as more intelligent, stronger, and in tune with life as a whole. (pp. 59-68). The second, referred to as mature type, is contrasted as a longer-lasting experience of enduring tranquillity and inner peace, which is often experienced as a newfound spiritual perception and expanded awareness (Levin & Steele 2005:89-90). Implicit in these distinctions is that transcendent experiences may occur both as random and unpredictable, as well as a result of voluntarily engaging in certain mental and physical practices. Accordingly, religious and spiritual literature is filled with “recipes” for transcendent triggers, e.g. yogic practice, meditation, prayer, fasting, following certain types of diets, ingesting hallucinogenic drugs, intense experiences with nature, sports and aesthetics, etc. (pp. 91-92).

The lasting effect of inducing altered states of consciousness on peoples’ lives, are demonstrated in a study on the impact of experiences associated with psilocybin, under supportive conditions (Griffiths, Richards, Johnsen, McCann & Jesse 2008). Psilocybin is a psychedelic component found in certain types of mushrooms, which has been used to promote spiritual/mystical experiences in structured ceremonies throughout the ages (p. 1). None of the 36 initial volunteers in the study had a history of psychedelic drug use. At a 14 month follow up, Griffiths et al. (2008) found that a large amount of the participants described their “psilocybin experience” as “among the most meaningful and spiritually significant of their life” (p. 10). The experience was also said to have increased the participants sense of wellbeing and life-satisfaction to various extents, and nobody reported that the experience had negatively affected their sense of wellbeing. However, it should be noted there are risks related to psilocybin exposure, such as panic or fear reactions, perceptual disturbances, worsening in psychiatric conditions and the potential for future misuse of mind altering substances. In other words, there is an element of uncertainty in seeking altered states of consciousness, which may be highly dependent on the person’s psychological conditioning (pp. 10-11).

2.2.4 Transcendent Actualization

Abraham Maslow's (1908-1970) is perhaps best known for his hierarchy of needs, which is a model depicting the different levels of human motivation. Traditionally, this model is presented as a pyramid of physiological needs (survival and security) at the bottom, moving upwards to the psychological needs (membership in a society, esteem and self-actualization). Together, these motivational drives were seen as the five essential steps in human development (Hamel, Leclerc & Lefrancois 2003:3). However, through his studies of transcendent experiences, Maslow noticed that there was a sixth, and even more advanced motivational level than self-actualization. This became evident as many of his research subjects described self-transcendence as an essential driving force. The identification with something greater than their individual lives had induced a motivational shift, which often involved a strong desire to be of service to others, and some higher force or cause (Koltko-Rivera 2006:306). In Maslow's later work, the concept of transcendent actualization, which refers to the realization of one's spiritual meaning in everyday living, is introduced as the final step in the motivational hierarchy (Hamel et al. 2003).

According to Hamel et al. (2003), transcendent actualization is a form of self-realization based on an "awareness and experience of a Spiritual Centre, also called the Inner Being or the Self" (p. 4). Contrary to the transitory elevation of consciousness brought on by transcendent experiences, transcendent actualization refers to an ongoing intentional process of spiritual development. Similar to descriptions of the *mature* type of transcendent experiences (Levin & Steele 2005), this process is mediated by a combination of devotion and psycho-spiritual potential. Transcendent actualization is usually experienced as a gradual shift in one's attitude towards life, which involves a new appreciation and expanded awareness of the world. There is a distinct change in one's attitude towards life, in which one begins to relate to the world from a state of Being, rather than through what one does and accomplishes (Hamel et al. 2003). Based on this, it appears that human development seems to advance through a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Chandler, Holden & Kolander 1992). In this context, this implies moving from a state of fear and egoistic desires, to a state of profound inner harmony along with an ambition to be a catalyst for the betterment of the world. Because the values embraced in this state of Being is predominantly altruistic, transcendent actualization is depicted as a superior way to achieve happiness and wellbeing (Hamel et al. 2003).

Chandler et al. (1992) explain that the kind of motivation which emerges from spiritual yearnings “lie dormant” until the basic needs necessary for physical and psychological wellbeing is met. Also, that the intensity of motivation tends to grow weaker the more fulfilled a person becomes, which means that the spiritual needs are subtler and less demanding than the basic needs found at the lower levels of the hierarchy (p. 169). However, intrinsic spiritual motivations do appear to have significant impact on people’s sense of wellbeing. As noted by Reed (2009), there is considerable evidence to support the notion that self-transcendence is important for mental health. Research on self-transcendence consistently show decreased depression, increased morale and interest in self-care and completing activities of daily living during chronic illness (p. 398).

2.2.5 Spiritual Health

This section describes how the inextricable linking between spirituality and health manifests itself in individuals as a structure of spiritual health. The linkage between the two concepts of spiritual and health are usually conceived of as “spiritual wellbeing” (Fisher et al. 2000:134), and examined through the characteristics and interactions of those who are spiritually well (Hawks 1994). According to Hettler (1976), spiritual wellness means to be able to reflect on the meaning of life, yet maintain an open and tolerant attitude towards others who may hold different worldviews than oneself. A certain level of consistency between the one’s inner values and outer expression in the world, is also required (p. 2). Another important aspect of spiritual wellness is the ability stay open and not repress one’s spiritual tendencies, and at the same time not get so caught up in the spiritual dimension that one’ neglects the other dimensions of wellbeing. In other words, somebody who is spiritually well acknowledges and nurtures the spiritual dimension, yet remains attentive to the other aspects of wellbeing (Chandler et al. 1992:170).

Spiritual health then, is not simply one dimension alongside the other health dimensions of health, rather, it emerges from the combination of these internal characteristics and external expressions of spiritual wellness, and interacts with the other dimensions of health (Hawks 1994, Chandler et al. 1992). In reviewing research describing factors associated with spiritual wellness, Hawks (1994) concludes that good spiritual health means to be in possession of:

A high level of hope, faith and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general,

and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfilment which includes connectedness with self, others, and a higher power or larger reality (Hawks 1994:5).

Fisher (1999) describes similar components in a multidimensional model of connectedness derived from his own research on Catholic schoolteachers. Here, spiritual health is viewed as a fundamental and dynamic state of being, which is evident by the extent that people experience: personal, social, environmental and a transcendent sense of wellbeing (p. 31). These are four elementary domains of wellbeing. The table below illustrates the main characteristics of each domain, as outlined by Fisher (1999) and Fisher et al. (2000).

Table 1 Four domains of spiritual wellbeing and their associated characteristics

Four domains of spiritual wellbeing	Characteristics
Personal Domain (Personal wellbeing)	A person's relationship with self. Keywords are meaning, purpose and values in life. This is the area of self-awareness and identity development.
Communal Domain (Social wellbeing)	Relationships with others. The quality and depth of inter-personal relationships between self and others in relation to morality and culture, including love, justice, hope and faith in humanity.
Environmental Domain (Environmental wellbeing)	Covers individuals' relationship with nature and physical environment, but it implies more than taking care of the physical and biological. The relationship with the environment experienced as awe and wonder, unity and a sense of connectedness
Transcendental/Global Domain (Transcendental wellbeing)	The Transcendental/Global domain is expressed through one's relationship with the Transcendent (i.e. ultimate concern, cosmic force, transcendent reality or God), which includes faith, adoration, and/or the worship of the mysterious source of life

Fisher's four domains of spiritual wellbeing are inextricably intertwined, which indicates that a person's spiritual health be may assessed by the combined effect of spiritual wellbeing experienced in each domain. It follows from this that spiritual health is attained by developing positive relationships in each domain, and is further increased when people experience positive relationships in more domains. For many, their sense of wellbeing is more affected by one domain over the others (Fisher 1999:31, Fisher et al. 2000:135). As illustrated above, spiritual health is not conceptualized as something distinctly separate from the other

dimensions (physical, mental, and social) of health found in the WHO (2003) definition. Rather, it both includes and exceeds physical, mental and social dimensions of health. As previously mentioned, characteristic of the different descriptions of spiritual wellness is the strong emphasis on wholeness and consistency between the subjective inner world of individuals, and their expressions in the social world. Thus, the spiritual aspect of health could be understood as that which *binds* – the inner aspects of one’s being with the synthesized (or objectivated) expressions of oneself and others in the world. (Fisher 1999, Hawks 1994, Hettler 1976, Chandler et al. 1992).

2.2.6 Sense of Coherence

Because spiritual strivings provide people with meaning, purpose, and an over-arching framework for living (Zinnbauer et al. 1999), Antonovsky’s (2000) theory of a “sense of coherence” (SOC) was chosen for the further exploration of the health promotional aspects of spirituality. The theory of a “sense of coherence” was developed in response to findings from Antonovsky’s epidemiologic study on Israeli women’s adaption to menopause, many of whom were concentration camp survivors (Lindström & Eriksson 2006). Antonovsky was puzzled when he discovered that some of the women had maintained good health despite having lived through extreme tragedy and suffering. He began to ponder “why some people, regardless of major stressful situations and severe hardships stay healthy, while others do not” (Eriksson & Lindström 2008:191). In elaborating on a response to this (salutogenic) question, he discovered that the key to sustain good health during times of stress is highly dependent on perception - that is, the *meaning* ascribed to life, and events faced. From this realization, he developed the theory of “sense of coherence”. SOC is built around three central components of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, which account for the interaction between the person and stimuli from the surrounding environment (Eriksson & Lindström 2008, 2005).

“Comprehensibility” refers to people’s cognitive interpretation of outer and internal stimuli; whether they are perceived as ordered, coherent, and structured, rather than chaotic, random and unexplainable. A strong sense of comprehensibility promotes an experience of life as predictable, as well as a readiness to understand unexpected events. “Manageability” is defined as the extent to which people believe that they have enough resources to manage both present and future challenges. A strong sense of manageability promotes a feeling of being in control over one’s life, which in return protects from feelings of victimhood and unfairness.

“Meaningfulness” is refers to the perception of life as meaningful, and that despite struggles and demands, that life is worthwhile. Meaningfulness is described as the motivational element of a “sense of coherence” because it triggers an emotional engagement towards certain areas of life (Antonovsky 2000:34-37). Antonovsky integrated all three aspects of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness in his definition of a “sense of coherence” as:

A global orientation that express the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one’s external and internal environments in the course of living is structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (Antonovsky 1993:725).

According to Antonovsky (2000), *not everything* in life has to be conceived of as understandable, manageable and meaningful in order for someone to obtain a strong SOC - only those areas of life that are deemed important by the person (p. 41). The theory of SOC formed the basis of the salutogenic approach to health, which became essential for the development of health promotion theory. Health promotion, in contrast to pathology, is concerned with that which fosters good health, that is, the “positive, dynamic and empowering aspects of health” (Eriksson & Lindström 2008:194). Empowerment, being one of the core values of health promotion, refers to the possibilities and abilities of individuals, groups and societies to take control over their health and wellbeing (Nutbeam 1998:354). Empowerment is linked to SOC in that it involves the ability to mobilize resources to better manage challenging situations (Sørensen et al. 2002). According to Eriksson and Lindström (2006), evidence support the notion that SOC is a mechanism which strengthens “resilience and develops a positive subjective state of both mental and physical health, quality of life and wellbeing” (p. 378). Strang and Strang (2001) suggest that spirituality can be related to a “sense of coherence” because it provides meaning and answers to existential questions, which increases comprehensibility and manageability of life in general, and of challenging situations in particular (p. 129).

3. Methodology and Research Design

This chapter describes and explains the methodological choices employed in this study. My previous experiences with the phenomenon, reflections regarding my role as a researcher, ethical considerations and quality assessments are also included.

3.1 Research Design

The literature review reveals an apparent lack of consensus on how to understand both the phenomenon (spirituality) and much of the (quantitative) research covering the relationship between spirituality and health. In consideration of the limited knowledge about the *experienced* significance of spirituality for health and wellbeing, I chose a descriptive and explorative approach. Through qualitative research-interviews with spiritually oriented people, this study illuminates the subjective experience of the spirituality-health relationship.

3.1.1 Choice of Scientific Approach

Qualitative research methods are particularly suitable for accessing the lived experience phenomena (Thagaard 2009), and is therefore an appropriate choice for examining how people experience the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing. Qualitative research methods can be traced back to the philosophical roots of the interpretivist paradigm, which emerged as a protest to the strong influence of positivism in the social sciences (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape 2013). Positivism holds that the social world can be approached through similar methods as those employed by the natural sciences. Implicit is a strong emphasis on objectivity, and the idea that human action unfolds according to natural laws (p. 8-9). In contrast, the interpretivists argue for a deeper understanding and recognition of the subjective interpretation that is always present in the development of knowledge (p. 11). Correspondingly, qualitative methods were designed to access a deeper understanding, as well as more thorough explanation of subjective experiences. The focus is on “behaviour, feelings and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives” (Holloway & Wheeler 2010:3).

Qualitative research methods have evolved in various directions from the late 19th century, and there is now a variety of approaches available (Ormston et al. 2013). Because each approach is based on certain philosophical tenets which direct the research process, there are

specific standards of trustworthiness that correspond with the particular orientations. The qualitative researcher must therefore be aware of- and present the philosophical foundation of the chosen approach (Morrow 2005, Creswell 2007).

3.1.2 Phenomenological Inquiry

Because the purpose of this study is to understand the spirituality-health relationship from the perspectives of the subjects, a phenomenological approach to inquiry was taken.

Phenomenology aims for a nuanced and in-depth description of lived experiences (Gallagher 2012), and the researcher's reflections of his/her own experiences may form the basis of the research project (Thagaard 2009). There are two main approaches to phenomenological research: descriptive and interpretative (Creswell 2007). While the descriptive approach originated in the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the interpretative approach evolved from the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who was a student of Husserl. The essential difference arose from Heidegger's rejection of Husserl's belief that the researcher can detach from previous experiences, and discover the essences of a phenomenon. As such, the interpretative approach allows for a more active involvement of the researcher's accumulated knowledge in the development, and articulation, of the findings (Wimpenny & Gass 2000, Lopez & Willis 2004). For this study, a transcendental descriptive approach was chosen to answer the research question.

Edmund Husserl's main objective was to uncover and describe the nature of consciousness. He thought of phenomenology as "a kind of descriptive enterprise aimed to specify the characteristic structures of consciousness and the world as we experience it" (Gallagher 2012:7). Hence, transcendental phenomenology is the study of *how experiences appear* in consciousness – not the way things are in actuality. Central to Husserl's phenomenology is that an understanding of how the consciousness works can only be obtained through by attaining a transcendental attitude. The transcendental attitude is characteristically different from the natural taken-for-granted attitude of ordinary perception, and is developed by engaging in a process called Epoché. In Epoché, the researcher attempts to disengage from ordinary consciousness in order to be able to refrain from judgment. This is a process in which the researcher systematically strives to set aside all preconceived opinions, conceptions, assumptions and theories about how things work - so that the essence of the experience under investigation may be clearly perceived (Gallagher 2012, Tufford & Newman 2010). In analysing lived experiences, the phenomenologist carefully scrutinizes two

interrelated aspects of the experience: *what* is experienced (noema) and *how* is it experienced (noesis). The noematic aspect of the experience refers to the way the phenomenon appears in consciousness, while the noetic aspect refers to the context, meanings and feelings associated with the phenomenon. Although both aspects are always present in any experience, their prominence may differ across circumstances, and from one experience to another (Moustakas 1994, Langergaard, Rasmussen & Sørensen 2006, Creswell 2007, King & Horrocks 2010).

Furthermore, phenomenological inquiry emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the phenomenon and the contextual meaning that the object appears in relation to (Gallagher 2012). The contextual background of a specific phenomenon is referred to as *horizon* and *life-world*. The horizon is the stream of objects one chooses *not* to focus on, and that lingers in the background of the examined phenomenon. This means that the specific meaning attached to a phenomenon is always defined in relation to the phenomenon's horizon. The life-world is the multifaceted fabric of embedded meaning (collective meaning) in society, and refers to our immediate and pre-reflective experience of the world. Because the life-world existed before the individual, it naturally becomes the foundation for our understanding of the world and thus, lies at the heart of all scientific knowledge (Langergaard et al. 2006, Gallagher 2012). A central characteristic of the life-world is that it is experienced as a shared world: "All of us together are in the life-world" (Gallagher 2012:160).

Although Husserl main concern was with transcending ordinary perception, he still recognized the intersubjectivity of human existence (Moustakas 1994, Schutz 1970). He did, however, insist that the transcendental method could be applied to the intersubjective world in order to expose "that which unites individual consciousness in the phenomenological unity of social life" (Schutz 1970:7). In other words, he deemed it possible to discover the components that make up the "common consciousness" of the social world. Husserl's conception of the life-world became central in the writings of the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz (Karlsaune 2008). Although Schutz agreed that the transcendental phenomenological reduction could clarify the *origin* of the meaning-structures of the life-world (which is in the subjective consciousness of individuals), he could not see how this method was relevant for obtaining a description of the existential structure of the life-world. The structures of the life-world, he argued, are produced in intersubjective cooperation, so hence they can only be identified in the realm of everyday life - through ordinary perception. Being a sociologist, Schutz preoccupation was with the human experience of daily living. His work is commonly referred to as "mundane" phenomenology (as opposed to transcendental). Schutz' phenomenologically

founded sociology became the primary influence of the sociology of knowledge developed by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (Karlsaune 2008, Luckmann 1990a, Schutz 1970).

It is beyond the scope of this study to delve more deeply into the philosophy of transcendental phenomenology and its relationship with sociology. The relationship is highlighted for the sake of illustrating theoretical and methodological consistency (Englander 2012); the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl extends to the sociology of Berger & Luckmann (Kvale 1994:61), which is applied for the purposes of understanding the interconnectedness between the individual and society. By choosing transcendental phenomenology as the method for data collection and analysis, the subjective experiences of the participants - as they appear to them - remain the focal point throughout the research process, while at the same time acknowledging the presence of the intersubjective pre-reflective influence of our shared reality. Transcendental phenomenology is therefore the fundamental methodological perspective, while the phenomenological sociology described in “The Social Construction of Reality” (1966) is applied in the discussion of the results.

3.1.3 Phenomenological Research Interviews

Phenomenological research usually gathers information through inductive qualitative methods (i.e. interviews, conversations, participant observation, focus meetings, action research and analysis of personal texts), and aims to stay true to the perspective of the research participants (Lester 1999). Because the purpose of this study is to understand the spirituality-health relationship, based on people’s perceptions and experiences, data were collected using individual phenomenological interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, Englander 2012). The phenomenological interview is specifically designed to generate rich, detailed descriptions of human experiences, and is therefore distinctively different from other types of interviews (Roulston 2010).

Central is the use of an open-ended approach in which the interview is conducted as an informal conversation between the researcher and the participant. However, the researcher’s role is primarily to be an attentive listener, and engages in the conversation when it is necessary to stimulate the participant to provide more details, or to help keep the conversation flowing (Roulston 2010, Moustakas 1994). This requires that the interviewer is flexible and adapts the questions according to the individual participant’s story, thereby allowing the

participant to bring up relevant topics according to their own judgment (Thagaard 2009). Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher may develop a series of questions designed to help the participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. However, these questions may be varied, altered or not used at all during the conversation (Moustakas 1994). It is important that the interviewer goes through the process of setting aside (Epoché) his/her own experiences with the phenomenon, and takes a neutral, but interested stance. The researcher must listen carefully in order to ask relevant follow-up questions and keep the conversation grounded in the topic. Sensitivity towards the situation is necessary to obtain as complete a description of the experience as possible. Furthermore, the interviewer is responsible for providing an environment in which the participant feels comfortable to share the experiences that the researcher wants to explore (Moustakas 1994, Roulston 2010, Englander 2012).

The strength of the phenomenological interview is that it allows the information to flow freely between the researcher and participant, which provides a much more comprehensive knowledge than firm structured approaches (Groenwald 2004, Creswell 2007). By acknowledging the validity of subjective experiences, the participant, and not the researcher, is viewed as the experienced expert on the investigated subject (Malterud 2008). The phenomenological interview has the potential to illuminate individual variety and nuances, and is thus a powerful method for producing new knowledge and deeper understandings of the investigated phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, Lester 1999, Englander 2012). There are, however, a number of methodological challenges to this close interaction between researcher and participant (Thagaard 2009) that will be addressed in the section about “the role of the researcher”.

3.2 The Epoché Process

Epoché includes entering a pure internal place, as an open self, ready to embrace life in what it truly offers. From the Epoché, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awarenesses and understandings. We are challenged to come to know things with a receptiveness and a presence that lets us be and lets situations and things be so that we can come to know them just as they appear to us (Moustakas 1994:86).

Before collecting the data, I cleared my mind through the Epoché process. By entering a meditative state, I recalled my personal experiences with spirituality and contemplated the

influence of those experiences on my life. I observed how different feelings and thoughts accompanied the various experiences, which allowed my preconceptions and prejudgments to enter and leave freely. I repeated this meditative procedure until I experienced a sense of internal closure (over a period of several days). I continued with writing a list of the identified preconceptions and prejudgments and reviewed the list until I felt an internal readiness to approach the participants with a clear mind and a receptive attitude (Moustakas 1994). Below is an excerpt of relevant situations and reflections that surfaced during the Epoché process.

My first memory is of myself as an unaware spiritually seeking child - unaware because I did not know that was what I was at the time. Growing up in a secular family during the 1980 – 1990's, spirituality was not a topic during my childhood. Spiritual content was limited to traditional church attendance on special occasions (school services at Christmas, baptisms, confirmations and funerals) and Christianity class in school (Christianity was a mandatory subject during elementary and middle school). Existential questions, including God, spirits or life after death, were simply not a part of the social discourse I experienced growing up. I remember thinking about God and my own existence growing up.

The next flashback is from living in Los Angeles (age 20-22), which is when my interest in spirituality became more explicit. Here, I was introduced to different (alternative) spiritualities and holistic health – primarily through yoga. I had already started to practice yoga on my own in Norway, but once in Los Angeles I found a yoga studio and developed a regular yoga practice. Yoga and meditation quickly became a part of my daily routine, and I remember how a distinct feeling of clarity and ease arose in my body and mind during those years. Yoga made me feel connected, centred and alive. I was very eager to learn, both the physical practice and the philosophy, and I remember noticing at the time that it was almost like a subtle self-awareness emerged.

Another related memory from those years was the appearance of Sylvia Brown (a then renowned psychic) on *The Montel Williams Show*. As I turned on the TV, there was this strange woman with a deep husky voice delivering messages from the afterlife and addressing all those existential questions that had been with me all my life. I remember being so intrigued that I immediately went out and bought a selection of her books. Those books opened up a brand new way of perceiving reality, and it was as if life went from grey to colourful – it literally became multidimensional. Of course, not all of it resonated as most of her descriptions, for example of the afterlife, appeared to me more like fairy tales of wishful

thinking and left me with a feeling of “too good to be true”. It did, however, reopen my mind to contemplation of fundamental existential questions such as: What is the meaning of life? Who am I? What happens when we die? Is there a God?

The following 10 years were a rather intense period, both spiritually and inter-relationally. I attended various healing and clairvoyant courses. A significant memory is that of a one-week-long spiritual self-development retreat in Norway. It could probably be characterized as new age spirituality because it included channellings from beings living in other dimensions and galaxies, guided meditations, role-play, shamanistic drumming and the practice of psychic readings. For me, this week was filled with spiritual insights, epiphanies and creating new relationships. The memories of this week stayed with me for a while, hence allowing different experiences to emerge and new aspects to unravel.

Then I feel how life-changing those experiences at the retreat became. My mind moves through some of the situations from the subsequent years, and a kind of paradoxical or bittersweet feeling lingers within me: on the one hand, it (the retreat) brought me to a place of feeling a sense of deep alignment and connection to the universe, and at the same time I see myself disconnecting. I sit with this awareness of paradox for a while. From the paradox, chaos and friction emerge in my life, both my internal and external life – predominantly due to a challenging marriage and a mismatch between inner and outer stimuli. I was seeking answers through spirituality - by communication with other people, reading books, attending self-development workshops and basically just working on finding and listening to my inner voice. It was a period of discovering the spiritual place within my being - in the midst of conflicting circumstances.

I remember being very open and receptive, and how I made it my mission to distinguish my own inner voice from all the external “noise” from my social contexts. I struggled to unite my passionately atheistic husband with my internal longing to explore my spiritual self, which made me feel torn. During this time of polarity (in 2005), I am introduced to Christian spirituality. One of my “alternative/new-age” friends invited me to come with her and a couple of her friends to a charismatic Christian meeting held at the house of this Pentecostal pastor who claimed to demonstrate biblical signs and wonders. I came along solely out of curiosity. When we walked in the door, the first thing that met us was music and approximately 20-30 people lifting their hands - some were singing, some were babbling, and others were crying (I did not know that they were speaking in tongues back then, I had never

heard of that at the time). I was mesmerized. I had not seen anything like this before - so much love and surrender. Very different from the kind of spiritual gatherings I was used to. It was like an atmosphere of total surrender. I felt like, wow there is something here. When the pastor began to preach, it was like the atmosphere kept shifting between love and fear-based intolerance. I was so puzzled upon leaving. What was this?

I went back to these meetings a couple of times and got to know a few people in the “congregation”. A woman (who later became my friend) and the pastor very actively tried to convince me about Jesus and salvation; they presented powerful testimonies of the power of prayer, and warned of the dangers of alternative spiritualities. I entered into many discussions and arguments over this because I could not (no matter how hard I tried) see how a prophecy delivered through prayer was any different than a semi-conscious channelling. Apparently, it was the source of the information that made the difference. Anything not revealed through Jesus was said to come from demons. Although I was uncomfortable with the theology, I was so committed to this search for spiritual truth, that I had to try it before I could reject it. I decided that even though I was not convinced that it was necessary to surrender to Jesus in order to avoid hell, I jumped in. I even went to bible school. I had many spiritual experiences during prayer and worship, such as insights, and feelings of divine guidance, and I felt my hands get warm when praying for others (just as I had felt my hands get warm before during various healing courses)

I did have spiritual experiences. However, the internal struggle only intensified. Everything in me resisted the dualistic train of thought, and I simply could not come to accept that people needed to be “saved” and that faith is decisive for life after death. By the end of the year in bible school, it became so contradictory that I could no longer take it. I felt that my previous experiences were demonized through ignorance and fear and I could not pretend to believe anymore. It was crushing because I had gotten to know so many wonderful people - people with good intentions. Their worldview was simply too narrow and it became impossible to be myself in that context. By the summer of 2008, I had disengaged from all my spiritual/religious social contexts and started on a bachelor’s degree in sociology.

By arriving at this point in the Epoché process, I felt an incredible sense of internal peace. It can be described as a sigh of relief. Through sociology - especially literature on the sociology of religion, I found an approach to the subject matter that both resonated and stimulated my analytical mind. This enabled me to review my experiences from a more comprehensive

perspective and apply anthropological, social and psychological meanings. I spent a lot of time reviewing my life, analysing and working on my understanding. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I have rationalized all my spiritual experiences or reduced them to pure social phenomenon. Although some experiences have an obvious social element attached to them since they arose through a united collective intent, which makes it more difficult to distinguish the spiritual from the social. Other spiritual experiences appeared in solitary – both kinds have left a lasting internal indescribable knowingness. It is not possible to describe what this knowingness is about – maybe eternal existence...or nothingness – or both.

During the last eight years I have been less interested in discovering “the ultimate spiritual truth” or searching for transformative experiences. My life has been dominated by a strong “earthly” orientation – studying, working and raising children. Three years ago, I needed a day job because of my life situation and I began working in the Norwegian Church. It is an administrative position, so it does not involve much theology for me personally, but I am nonetheless continuously faced with that specific belief system, which can be both inspiring and highly provocative.

Because of my, at times, intense life journey, I believe that I have gained an increased awareness of my own prejudgments and am (occasionally) capable of transcending such structures. A recent spiritual experience that emerged in my consciousness was a very unexpected experience. The experience was triggered through a conversation I had with a very conservative female priest - a woman completely different from myself. During our conversation I could feel that even though our interpretative framework was highly different, there was this sharing of an intensely honest spiritual longing present in the room. This encounter, along with a few questions she asked me, sparked several spiritual experiences over the next few days, such as feelings of connectedness to the divine, personal revelations and a broadening in my self-understanding.

I reflected upon my spiritual experiences and their impact upon my life until I felt an internal peace and it became easy to clear my mind (Moustakas 1994). Because of the diverse range of experiences and my analytical nature – I have engaged in similar processes of identifying my preconceptions and presuppositions many times throughout my life, and I continuously strive to maintain an open and receptive attitude towards other people. I am aware that my experiences with “collective spirituality” both inside and outside of a religious framework, has made me critical and cautious towards any kind of organized spirituality. It can be

extremely difficult to balance individual experiences with strong collective convictions. I am equally aware of the life-changing potential of spiritual experiences and how mind blowing and growth enhancing it can be to experience spiritual clarity and attain an awareness of an interconnectedness of life.

My experiences have shown me that spirituality can transcend human constructs, that it comes in many shapes and settings, and that it is solely up to the individual who has the experiences to interpret their meanings. I expect the participants to account for a variety of experiences - interpreted through each participant's unique and specific life-world. Moreover, I welcome the possibility of the participants sharing experiences that are different from my own.

3.3 The Role of the Researcher

Because the interview situation is a form of social interaction upon which knowledge is produced through conversation (Kvale 1994), the relationship that develops between researcher and participant is highly influential for the development of the interview conversation (Thagaard 2009). It is therefore important to consider how the participants' responses may be coloured by their reactions to the researcher's appearance - including personality and outer characteristics such as age, gender and social background (p. 103).

Even though I have not been active in any defined spiritual context for the last few years, I can see how my role can be defined as that of an "insider looking in" (Green 2014:1). The majority of the participants were familiar with my personal interest in the research phenomenon, which may have influenced the interaction in several ways. Because of my first-hand knowledge, it was easy for me to project an authentic understanding and follow up with spontaneously relevant questions, which induced a sense of naturalness to the conversations. Some of the participants clearly expressed that they felt like they were talking to somebody who could understand their experiences. A feeling of acceptance and non-judgment may have been important in obtaining honest descriptions of experiences that they otherwise may not have shared (Green 2014, Thagaard 2009). However, it is possible that my familiarity caused them to not consider certain aspects of their experiences, and that my preconceived knowledge caused me not to consider certain relevant follow-up questions (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Even though I was cautious not to impact the participants' responses, I acknowledge

that my own established understandings may still have influenced the conversations (Moustakas 1994).

During the entire process of data analysis, I strived to keep an objective approach in order to prevent my previous experiences with spirituality from tainting the interpretation. However, I do believe that it is nearly impossible to *completely* set aside past experiences. And regardless of any past experience related to the research-phenomenon, I posit that the information extracted from the data is the necessary result of my subjective understanding, and my interaction with the research field – others with a different experiential background from mine may have interpreted the information contained in the transcripts differently.

3.4 Data Collection

The process of collecting data included obtaining permission from the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD), recruitment of an adequate sample, preparing for the interview, and conducting the interviews.

3.4.1 Preparation

All research projects that make use of computer-based equipment to process personal data are obligated to notify the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD) (Thagaard 2009). Because this project involved both the collection of personal information and the use of a tape recorder, an application to conduct research was sent to the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD). The empirical investigation proceeded when the study was approved (see Appendix A for NSD's approval).

3.4.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience, purposive and snowball sampling (Berg 2009). Convenience sampling relies on available subjects, while purposive sampling is a strategy based on the researchers own knowledge “about some group to select subjects who represents this population” (p. 50). Snowballing refers to the recruitment of participants through the acquaintances of the existing participants. A problem with this method is that the sample may be dominated by people from the same social context. However, this can be avoided by using people from different networks as referrals (Thagaard 2009). In this study, the standard for selecting the research participants was securing that they

have had the necessary experiences (Creswell 2007, Englander 2012). I therefore formulated the following criteria for participation in the project: (a) they had to define themselves as spiritual, (b) they have to had spiritual experiences, and (c) they had to use their spirituality in daily living.

I began by contacting a few people that I believed could give me access to the field, and chose to approach three experienced “spiritual explorers” from my own network, introducing them to the project and requesting their help to recruit participants. All three agreed to participate, and two provided me with names and contact information to others they considered potential candidates. Some of the participants were recruited through the subjects provided by the two initial “door openers”. In order to avoid any conflict between the involved parties (Thagaard 2009), I made sure, before I initiated any contact, that everybody who was not initially in my own network was asked and gave their consent to the person that suggested them (Thagaard 2009). Not everybody who was asked was interested or had the time to participate, but those who agreed showed interest and enthusiasm about the project.

3.4.3 The Sample

The sample consists of 10 participants in Norway, all of whom are female. The sample size is aligned with the recommended guidelines for phenomenological research methods, which according to Mason (2010) is between 3-25 participants. There were no requirements set for the characteristics of the respondents, nor did I ask for personal identification (i.e. age, race, education, occupation or health status) during the interviews. Nonetheless, information did often emerge naturally during the conversation. Through the 10 interviews, I received a lot of information about the participants’ perceptions and experiences with the influence of spirituality on their life, health and wellbeing. All the participants appeared as conscious, reflecting and responsible individuals with a passion for exploring the mysteries of their existence. However, the emphasis placed on spirituality for their life and wellbeing varied. Some were clearly more spiritually oriented and engaged than others, but all had relevant and interesting experiences to share. Five of the participants ran their own businesses, offering various spiritual services to other people for a fee, including psychic readings, mediumship, channelling, spiritual guidance, house cleansing rituals, healing, acupuncture and massage therapy.

The Socio-Spiritual Context of the Participants

Norway is one of the most secularized of all the European countries. Although the majority (approximately 75% of the population) are still members of the Church of Norway, the number who identify with Christianity is increasingly dropping. Evidence has strongly suggested that there is a change in the religious scenery in Norway, which involves a turning away from church-related religion to more alternative spiritualities, along with increased religious pluralism through immigration (Botvar 2010, Wollebæk 2013). Although I did not specifically ask about their relationship to religion - all 10 participants clearly composed their spiritual understanding from sources outside of organized religion. Two of the informants had been dedicated Christians most of their lives, up until a few years ago when they began to question Christianity's core belief system. Both had experienced a "spiritual transformation" in which traditional Christianity became replaced by modern/alternative spiritual approaches. Because of stereotypes attached to the concept, another informant continuously expressed unease upon calling herself "spiritual". She consistently emphasized the *naturalness* of her spiritual experiences, in addition to the importance of staying grounded in the earthly experience of everyday life.

Why only Women?

Why did I end up with a purely female sample? The most obvious explanation is the fact that the majority of the people who were asked to participate, were female, although three men were asked. One did not answer, one was busy due to a lot of travelling and one did not want to participate. Research on contemporary spirituality strongly suggests that the vast majority of those involved in holistic/new age/alternative spirituality are women - some studies have found that as many as 80% of those involved in spirituality happen to be female (Woodhead 2007, Rose 1998). I am not going to elaborate on the explanations for this, as they are comprehensive and presumably connected to the social developments of gender roles throughout human history (Woodhead 2007). However, the general preponderance of women in spiritual involvement provides a plausible explanation for why it was easier to recruit women than men.

3.4.4 The Interview Guide

In preparing for the interviews, I developed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B). Interview questions were formulated to meet the phenomenological criteria of description (Englander 1994:25), and structured to facilitate the obtaining of a detailed and

comprehensive description of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). The questions covered both perceptions and experiences with spirituality, as well as the relevance of this for different aspects of the participants' health and wellbeing. The interview guide consists of seven questions with subcategories. The subcategories were added as a tool to help access different aspects of the participants' experiences. As such, they were marked as keywords or open questions aimed to keep the conversations flowing and to ensure the obtaining of nuances, e.g. thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. The interview guide was not systematically followed; instead, it was treated as a tool to tap more deeply into the participants' experiences (Moustakas 1994), and to help keep the conversation grounded in the research topic (Kvale & Brinkman 2009).

3.4.5 Conducting the Interviews

All interviews were scheduled via telephone, e-mail or Facebook messenger, with each interview lasting between 40-90 minutes. To ensure an environment in which the participants felt safe and comfortable to share their experiences (Moustakas 1994), the interviews took place at locations chosen by the participants. Seven interviews were conducted in their homes, while three interviews took place (in a secluded area) at the participants' work-place. Before the interviews, I asked them if they had read the information letter sent out prior to our meeting, and repeated the information contained in the letter to make sure that the participants were adequately informed about the procedures. Everybody involved was given the opportunity to ask questions preceding the interviews, and all the participants granted me permission to use an audio recorder. By using a tape-recorder, I was able to be fully present, and attentive during the interviews.

Each interview started with me asking the following opening questions: What does spirituality mean to you? and – Can you tell me how you became a spiritual person? These questions introduced the topic and created a foundation for further conversation. The second question usually triggered detailed descriptions of spiritual experiences relevant for the direction of their lives, and many participants touched upon the other questions when they described how they were introduced to spirituality. These conversations flowed lightly and essential themes emerged naturally, while spontaneous follow-up questions were used to encourage more detailed descriptions of the structural aspects of the experiences (thoughts, feelings, social context, the meaning of experience means etc.).

Although the majority of the participants were eager to share as much as possible about their experiences, some were more reluctant than others which required a more active participation on my part in order to keep the conversation going. These conversations became more balanced in the alterations between question and answer - either because the participants struggled to find the appropriate words to express their experiences, or simply because they expected me to take the lead as the interviewer. Some participants were more hesitant in the beginning, but increasingly opened up as we settled in to the conversation. One participant said it was a difficult topic to talk about because she was not used to speaking to others about her spirituality. Others expressed that because spirituality is part of everything they do in life, it was hard to be concrete. This problem was usually solved by encouraging the participants to relax and allow the experiences that have been the most important to simply emerge in their consciousness. I also noticed that I became more comfortable and settled in the role as interviewer as the interviewing process progressed, and it was increasingly easier to create a comfortable atmosphere, after having gained some experience. Throughout all the interviews, I kept my attention focused and completely directed to the participants' stories.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

There are several ethical aspects to consider when conducting research interviews (Kvale 1994). This study followed the ethical guidelines provided by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH) regarding informed consent, confidentiality and ensuring that the participants' integrity remained intact throughout the entire research process (Thagaard 2009).

The principle of "informed consent" covers the participants' right to freely choose whether or not to participate (Kvale 1994:118). Because of limitations concerning the amount of information the researcher can provide, there are specific challenges tied to informed consent in qualitative research. The researcher must ensure that the potential participants are adequately informed, and at the same time, not provide such detailed information that it affects the participants' responses (Thaagard 2009:26). Prior to the interviews, the participants received an information letter and a consent form (Appendix C). The information letter explained the purpose of the project, what participation entailed and the procedures used to secure confidentiality. Confidentiality refers to the researcher's responsibility to keep the participants' identities hidden, which means that private information that may identify the

participants is excluded from publication (Kvale 1994:120). Personal information was therefore anonymized and treated with the utmost caution. Tape recordings were transferred to a password-protected computer immediately after the interviews with pseudonyms replacing all names, professions and locations in the interview transcript (Fossheim 2015). As an added procedure to ensure confidentiality, no names were used in the presentation of the findings in the study. Tape recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the project, but no later than 15th February 2017. This information was repeated at the beginning of each interview along with an opportunity to ask questions.

A key ethical principle is ensuring that no harm comes to the participants, which means that the researcher must preserve the participants' integrity by honouring their evaluations, motives and self-respect (Thagaard 2009:29). Both spirituality and health relate to personal issues, and may therefore be defined as *sensitive* research topics (McCorsker, Barnard & Gerber 2001). I aimed to stay attentive and respectful of the participants' boundaries in order to avoid the emergence of information they would later regret having shared. Because spirituality concerns people's perception of reality, the interviews may stir up difficult emotions, thereby causing critical self-reflection in hindsight. This could be a potentially distressing experience. To help prevent this, I was conscious to not critically devalue the participants' descriptions of their experiences during the interview (Thagaard 2009). Another challenge with regard to integrity arises *after* the data is collected and the participant is no longer directly in control over the information. Because the interpretation of the findings often involves the use of previous research and theoretical perspectives that are unknown to the participants, the participant's experiences may be used to explore somewhat unfamiliar (to the participants) topics and predicaments (Thagaard 2009). In regard to this, I remained attentive to how the participants were represented in the analytical process, and the presentation of the findings.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Transcription

Transcription means to transform the recorded data from the interviews into written text (King & Horrocks 2010:142). However, it is important to be aware that transcription will always lead to some degree of distortion from the original situation because aspects of the

nonverbal communication will not be registered by the tape-recording. This means that even the most accurate transcription may produce a different impression of the conversation than what was actually conveyed in the situation. It is therefore important that the researcher reflects on how the participant is presented in the written material (Malterud 2008). Consequently, each interview was transcribed in a *slightly verbatim mode* from the tape recordings (p. 79). During transcription the dialect was changed to “bokmål”, which is one of the two official standards of written Norwegian. Body language and other non-verbal communication in the room (e.g. laughter, cough, silence, change in tone of voice etc.) were noted to maintain a degree of authenticity in the written material. Relevant quotes were then translated into English during analysis, with the recorded material culminating in 134 pages of written text.

3.6.2 Analysis of Phenomenological Data

Data analysis was inspired by Creswell’s (2007) simplified version of the Moustakas (1994) method for transcendental phenomenological data analysis. The entire process of analysing the data involved practicing the art of bracketing out preconceptions and prejudgment. I remained conscious of not letting my personal understanding of the subject matter direct the analysis, but rather, to allow the participants’ descriptions of their experiences to inform, and lead me through the analytical process.

I began with reading each of the transcribed interviews several times in order to form an overall understanding of the text. Next, I searched for more specific meanings pertaining to the phenomenon through a “horizontalization” of data, which involved highlighting and extracting significant statements related to the participants’ experiences with spirituality. Overlapping and repetitive expressions were removed in order to identify the invariant constituents of experiences pertaining to the spirituality-health/wellbeing relationship. Each significant statement was then carefully analysed, and a particular meaning was formulated to capture the essence of the experience conveyed in the particular quote. When all the statements in the interview had been transformed into meaning statements, I continued with organizing the meanings into thematic categories. This process was repeated with each transcript. I proceeded with a cross-examination of the data in order to identify themes common to all participants. This was a time consuming a challenging process in which I closely examined the thematic labels, comparing the themes and their attached meaning units to the original expression in the complete transcript of each participant. Inconsistent themes or

subthemes were deleted or redefined to ensure that the major labels were described throughout the material, and that the subthemes were as “universal” as possible. However, some variance exists in the subthemes, as they portray the diverse aspects of each major theme as reflected by the participants. The data synthesis resulted in four major themes and several subthemes. From the final meaning units and themes, I engaged in a descriptive writing process in which I sought to distinguish the textural meaning (what) from the structural (how) elements of the experience in each theme. Both the textural and structural aspects were then integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The analysis concludes with a thematic synthesis of the essences of the participants’ experiences with spirituality as they relate to health and wellbeing (Creswell 2007:159).

3.7 Quality of Study

A central aspect of the research process in ensuring that the study meets the appropriate standards of credibility (Brink 1993). In quantitative research, the two terms *reliability* and *validity* are usually employed for evaluating the study’s quality. The meaning of these two terms can be summed up in two questions: Are the results accurate and consistent over time? Does the research instrument actually measure what it supposed to? The research is reliable if the study is conducted in a trustworthy manner, which means that similar findings will be discovered using the same or a similar method on the same or comparable sample. The research is valid if the findings reflect the reality of the research object/the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, validity targets the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation of the data (Golafshani 2003, Brink 1993, Thagaard 2009). Because qualitative research fundamentally differs from quantitative research, these concepts are commonly redefined as trustworthiness, rigour and the quality of study in the qualitative paradigm (Golafshani 2003). As previously mentioned, it is also important to note that differences within qualitative research entails that not all the qualitative research can be evaluated with the same strategies (Krefting 1991:215).

Being a phenomenological study, this thesis strived to fulfil the five standards for evaluating phenomenological research, as recommended by Creswell (2007). The first standard concerns the authors understanding and conveyance of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. In the early stages of this thesis, the philosophy of phenomenology was studied through reading and engaging in discussions with an experienced sociologist at the

university. I convey my understanding in the subchapter entitled: “3.1.2 Phenomenological Inquiry”. The second standard is that there must be a “clear” phenomenon to study. Although spirituality is a somewhat controversial research topic, the spirituality-health linkage is now a well-established research field (Koenig et al. 2012) - which is demonstrated in the introduction and literature review section. Third, it is important that there are set procedures used for data analysis. The transcribed interviews were analysed following the guidelines of a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, as outlined by Creswell (2007). Fourth, a phenomenological study must convey the overall context and essence of the experience of the participants. The essence and context of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon was integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenon, which is presented in the “presentation of findings” chapter. The fifth, and final standard of evaluation involves the reflexivity of the researcher. The standard of reflexivity, which refers to the ongoing self-examination of the researcher (Berg 2009) was maintained by consistently writing down emerging thoughts and associations as the study progressed. And, by taking time to evaluate my assumptions and preconceptions as they evolved over time. I engaged in regular reflection over the impact of the study on my understanding, and the influence of my understanding on the study. This process was both spontaneous and structured at the same time; spontaneous because thoughts and reflections would often emerge spontaneously during my workouts or other daily chores - when that happened I would note down keywords which I later expanded upon during my prescheduled time for reflection.

Creswell (2007) underscores that validity in phenomenological research is essentially a question of clarifying researcher bias. My dedication to this is detailed in Chapter “3.2 The Epoché Process.” By identifying my previous experiences with the phenomenon, I was able to enter the field with a newfound openness and self-awareness. Although my personal opinion holds that it is impossible to be completely unaffected by one’s past experiences, I believe that my openness and awareness of the influence of my previous experiences has sufficiently enhanced the trustworthiness of my approach. Additionally, I sought regular supervision of an experienced faculty member, who provided me with constructive feedback during the entire research process.

4. Presentation of Findings

This chapter presents the findings generated by the data analysis. The three tables below illustrate how theme clusters were identified from significant statements in the interview transcripts¹. 231 significant statements were selected from the 10 interview transcripts. Table 2 shows an example of significant statements and their formulated meanings. Table 3 contains three examples of major themes that emerged from their associated meanings, whereas Table 4 presents an overview of the four major themes and associated subthemes derived from the significant statements and meaning units. Subsequently, an exhaustive description of each theme is conveyed, and the findings chapter culminates in a thematic composite description of the participants' experiences with spirituality and their relevance for health and wellbeing.

Table 2 Selected examples of significant statements and their formulated meanings

Significant statement	Formulated meaning
“Spirituality is to be one with self and to be in contact with powers outside of our world”	Transcendent connectedness
“I do not look for genetic explanations of disease anymore. I look for underlying causes. What is the real issue?”	Altered perception of disease and illness
“It [referring to a spiritual experience] was very liberating. It was like being taken out of smallness and into vastness. I literally moved from ordinary consciousness and into a bigger picture.”	Dissolves restriction and promotes a feeling of freedom
“For me personally, I feel that the awareness of a spiritual relationship provides me with self-worth. It’s a confirmation of being something more... not just a coincidence.”	Relationship with self
“It has definitely changed the way I relate to others. I am a nicer person I think.”	Easier to relate to others
“I believe that we make a contract before we enter this life. We can choose what we want to experience, but now how we will experience it.”	Life is predestined

¹ The presentation of excerpts from the analytical process shown in table 2 and 3 were inspired by Anderson and Spencer’s (2002) phenomenological study, as illustrated by Creswell (2007).

Table 3 Examples of three theme clusters with their formulated meanings

Theme 1: Understanding spirituality

Spirituality is transcendent connectedness
All-encompassing concept
Universal love
Multiple divine realms
An experience of rediscovery
Spirituality extends beyond religion
Transcendent experiences are a vital aspect of spirituality
Spontaneity
What triggers the experience of spiritual connectedness?

Theme 2: Coping and empowerment

An experience of increased awareness
A holistic experience of health
Altered perception of disease and illness
Healing
Thoughts create reality
Taking control
Emotional stability
Alleviates stress
Letting go
Divine intervention
Finding answers to existential questions
Identify as souls
Inner peace
Less afraid of death
Dissolves restriction and promotes a feeling of freedom
Meaning and purpose
The universe knows what is best for me
Living in the flow/life changing
A journey of self-improvement
Challenges provide opportunities
I want to help people

Theme 3: Physical impacts

I do not really get sick anymore
Revitalization
Impacts diet
A draining experience
The condition of the physical body affects spiritual connectedness
Intrusion
Discomfort
Fear
Loss of control

Table 4 The four final themes and their associated subthemes

1. Understanding spirituality	(Re) Discovery A broader concept than religion Spirituality as mediated through experience Spiritual practices Meditation and prayer Nature Sound and healing practices
2. Coping and empowerment	Power of perception Strength and calmness Spiritual surrender Existential meaning From body to soul identification A spiritual plan Trust and protection Self-improvement Helping others
3. Physical impacts	Spirituality as beneficial Discomfort
4. The self and society	Authenticity A critical eye Social tension Doubt and explanation

Theme 1, Understanding spirituality, illustrates the essential elements of the participant’s perception of spirituality. The participants’ understanding of spirituality is conceived through four dimensions: a search process of rediscovery, spirituality as being broader than religion, mediated through experience and spiritual practice; Theme 2, Coping and empowerment, focuses on the experience of spirituality as a psychological resource, while Theme 3, Physical impacts describes both the positive and negative physical impacts of spirituality; although spirituality was connected to an overall sense of enhanced physical health and wellbeing, most participants also reported a variety of uncomfortable “side-effects” from their experiences with spirituality. Lastly, Theme 4, The self and society, demonstrates the influence of spirituality on the participants’ relationship with themselves and others. The interviews indicate that personal and social wellbeing are inextricably linked through the role of spirituality in promoting authenticity, critical thinking, social tension, and doubt and explanation.

4.1 Understanding Spirituality

This theme describes the fundamental structures of the participants' spirituality, and consists of four subthemes: (re) discovery, a broader concept than religion, spirituality as mediated through experience, and spiritual practices. Because the spirituality-health literature is dominated by a lack of consensus on the definition of spirituality, I find it relevant to include a description of the participants' understanding of spirituality (i.e. what spirituality means to them). By providing insight into the essence of the meaning of spirituality, this theme may provide further insight into the question of whether spirituality is a part of health – or merely an influence.

4.1.1 (Re) Discovery

Spirituality was described as a search process of rediscovering one's spiritual connection. I use the word *rediscovery* because all participants stated that their spirituality has always been a part of them. Some participants remembered dwelling on existential questions from a very young age, and had always experienced a kind of internal knowingness that life consists of more than mere biological existence. Others emphasized a sense of being in contact with a divine presence, seeing invisible people, having imaginary friends or experiencing what they refer to as unusual encounters, which they in retrospect have come to perceive as spiritual experiences. The recognition of unexplainable childhood experiences in adulthood is experienced as a revelation towards a greater understanding of themselves. Two participants described how spirituality became a source of clarity in the following way:

I was maybe around 11 or 12 when I first felt what I used to refer to as “war and peace”... because it just happened from time to time before I fell asleep at night...and I got so scared...I couldn't understand it...it was like I was going back and forth in a tunnel...then I arrived into this... place of pure peace...and it was so quiet, open and peaceful and I remember being so happy...and it was weird cause I didn't understand what it was, and I was too afraid to ask my parents... and then... when I got into theta healing, I recognized it. Now I know what was going on with me when I was a kid.

Ever since I was a little girl, I could see and feel things. I was always perceived as this weird kid with an overactive imagination. Now I know that there was more to my childhood experiences than fantasy.

Adolescence was frequently described as a period of heightened interest in supernatural phenomenon. Many participants recalled the excitement of being young and delving into new ideas, as they conveyed an experience of stretching the mind by reading books and magazines

about reincarnation and paranormal activity, such as ghosts, UFOs and aliens. However, at different points throughout their lives, daily living got in the way of spiritual seeking and exploration. Most participants reported putting spirituality aside for years during the busiest periods of their lives. The common experience was that different events and situations somehow triggered them into reclaiming their spirituality. While some participants mentioned difficult life situations, including a lack of direction and dissatisfaction as significant elements that had reignited the search for deeper meaning, others began to explore spirituality out of curiosity. One participant described a combination of curiosity, and a loss of direction in life, as the motivation for making an appointment to see a psychic – an appointment that changed the course of her life. She stated:

He [the psychic] began to tell me about my spiritual gifts and abilities... and he told me about things that I probably already knew, but that I hadn't really grasped before. It was after this that I chose to go down the spiritual path.

The spiritual search process was characterized by intense periods of pursuing knowledge and spiritual connections through studying and learning from experienced spiritual explorers. Participation in different spiritual courses, workshops and educations aimed at developing one's spiritual connection was consistently described as an important aspect of the spiritual search process. Subsequent to engaging in various courses several participants observed that they had been taught things they already knew, but which had been forgotten somewhere along the way.

4.1.2 A Broader Concept than Religion

The participants in this study clearly distinguished between spirituality and religion, with all participants perceiving spirituality as being broader than religion. Some participants stated that there was nothing religious about their spirituality, while others described spirituality as the essence in all religion, whereupon “a belief in something higher than your-self” was highlighted as an overlapping aspect. However, religion was frequently portrayed as too constricting and incompatible with the participants' own interpretation of spirituality. Religious rules and regulations for living were described as both unnecessary and too controlling to be associated with spirituality. Additionally, one participant pointed to the specific descriptions of God in the scripture as unaligned with her spiritual convictions. She stated: “Religion portrays God as this man with a beard who is the father of Jesus, and I just don't perceive it [the spiritual] like that.”

Although none of the participants identified with a specific religion at the time they were interviewed, many still used the word God in their descriptions of spirituality. Several participants explained that their perception of God has evolved over time. A common experience was one of finding ways to redefine the concept of God in order to release it from the traditional religious concept. Many participants described spirituality in terms of “that which is beyond religion” and “God independent of anything.” God was frequently defined as “a universal love”, “a unifying consciousness” or as “the source of all life.

Although people in other countries call God by a different name, it is just their way of being spiritual...you can think of it [spirituality] as that which has created everything and that which makes things happen without our interference... it is the spiritual that makes people believe that there is more to life than the physical.

Whether they could relate to the concept of God or not - all participants described spirituality as connection to something *higher* – above and beyond physical reality. Their descriptions, additionally and to a various extent emphasized a connection to oneself, other living beings, the earth, the universe and/or an overarching wholeness that is both transcendent and immanent. The transcendent aspect of spirituality often manifests as an inner knowingness of *being more* than what is experienced through mundane consciousness. Spiritual immanence was expressed through the perception of seeing Spirit *in* all things existing – the belief that rocks, plants and animals – everything emerges from the same substance. Nevertheless, many participants found it difficult to articulate and specify the meaning of spirituality. While some experience spirituality as such an all-encompassing concept that it embraces their entire life and impacts everything they do - from the thoughts they think, the books they read, the food they eat and the people they hang out with. Others experienced it as something they apply and connect with in certain situations, depicted more in terms of an “on and off” relationship. The quote below illustrates one participant’s struggle to define her experiences:

It is something I just can’t explain... it is something that is invisible... at the same time it creates a lot of questions, because I have access to information I’m normally not supposed to have...I have a source or a channel...I mean... I am still looking for answers to what it is...it just comes to me in the most incredible situations.

A prominent characteristic of the transcendent is that it is multidimensional. In addition to their portrayals of God, most participants associated spirituality with connecting to different aspects of the divine, such as angels, spirit guides or deceased people. Many participants

visualized the transcendent as a divine hierarchy. One participant described the distribution of spiritual energy in the following way:

God is on the top, but if we were to receive energy directly from God, it would be to powerful for us. God's energy is therefore distributed down through other dimensions before it reaches us here in the three-dimensional realm.

This spiritual hierarchy was commonly described in terms of frequency vibration, whereupon different spirit beings reside in various realms according to the level of density in their vibration. Some participants described the heroic characters behind the world religions, such as Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed as - "elevated masters", with a "high frequency vibration". These elevated spirits, along with other angelic beings, were believed to be closer to God. The different frequencies (dimensions) were often depicted as a spectrum of light, including dimensions consisting of dark and destructive forces.

4.1.3 Spirituality as Mediated Through Experience

In discussing the meaning of spirituality, the participants frequently leaned on their personal experiences, creating an impression of perception and experience as being deeply intertwined. Spiritual experiences (i.e. experiences of transcendent connectedness) have made profound lasting impressions on the participants, and were often referred to as something that brings "a lot of light and love", "energy and power" and "knowledge and information". The shared experience is one of increased and/or altered perception, often accompanied by the realization of oneness within all of life. Thus, it is in the very nature of spiritual experiences that they transcend the boundaries of both physicality *and* individuality. Spontaneity was another frequently mentioned characteristic of spiritual experiences. The following two excerpts illustrate some of the frequently mentioned characteristics of spiritual experiences:

I ended up in a one-on-one conversation with this person. I don't remember exactly what he said, but it was as if the light suddenly went on and everything changed - mostly in my inner landscape, through a sense of clarity which lifted me out of my current frustration and into a bigger perspective. That experience stayed with me for days.

Then all of a sudden, while I'm having a phone conversation with someone in another country, I begin to explain her feelings and get images of her situation, and I present her with information there is no way that I could know.

The above quotes, and a number of similar descriptions point to *social interaction* as a potential trigger for spiritual experiences. However, participants also highlighted the

importance of spending time alone in order to cultivate and explore one's personal spiritual energy and divine contacts, without the interference of external stimulation.

4.1.4 Spiritual Practices

Although spiritual experiences were characterized by a spontaneous and uncontrollable nature, the participants described employing different methods to help facilitate the occurrence of spiritual experiences. Meditation, prayer, nature, sound and healing practices were portrayed as gateways to spiritual experiences.

Meditation and Prayer

Prayer and meditation were among the most frequently mentioned sources of spiritual experiences. Although most participants clearly preferred mediation to prayer, the two terms were often used interchangeably. Participants explained that meditation is an exercise wherein they intentionally direct their consciousness towards the breath. The common experience is that focusing on the breath evokes a sense of stillness in the mind, often accompanied by a feeling of connectedness and clarity. This makes meditation an effective tool for cultivating spiritual awareness and altered perspectives. Mediation was further associated with positive emotions, such as freedom, joy and happiness. One participant described the impact of meditation in the following way:

In meditation I'm able to find the silent space in myself, which calms my thoughts. It's in this silent-space I feel the most connected to spirit. I can feel it in my heart centre actually. I get this warm tingly feeling, which makes me feel free as a bird.

Another participant shared how she had experienced a transforming divine encounter through prayer:

Something happened that I've never experienced either before or after. All of sudden I smelled roses and it was a feeling of... – What is this? After a while I experienced that God, or the Holy Spirit... or something... came to me with roses, and gently stroked my cheek. It was such a close, tender and loving encounter that it completely tore me apart...tears pouring down my cheeks. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced.

The above descriptions illustrate the potency of mediation and/or prayer for cultivating spiritual experiences of significance. Such experiences were said to be intensely emotion-laden experiences, sometimes even to the degree of feeling that one's heart has been cracked wide open. The participants often emphasized that meditation provides an experience of vast

inner freedom – they are lived experiences of simply being alive - unfiltered. While some participants had developed a routine for meditating and praying on a regular basis, most participants indicated using these practices more sporadically. Prayer and meditation were practiced both individually, and in groups of several people.

Nature

Nature was experienced as a pivotal source of regaining and maintaining the spiritual connection. Most participants described nature as a linkage between physicality and spirituality, promoting an experience of being physically grounded on earth, hence making it easier to integrate spiritual energies in their bodies. One participant referred to nature as a lifesaver, because she experiences a reconnection when she spends time in nature. She stated: “We [humans] are nature, so I feel like I get in touch with my soul.” Another participant shared a meditative experience she had in nature when she was 15 years old, in which she experienced a sense of oneness with the environment:

I grew up on this small farm in the countryside, and there is this beautiful place with trees around... I lied down on the ground... It must be the first spiritual experience I had, because as I was lying there, I went into this meditative mode and I felt myself expand. There were no limits between my physical body and the environment. It was as if I was one with everything. It was amazing. I had no idea how long I laid...it was so magical. That’s when I realized that we are all one. There really are no boundaries... It felt so good to just lie there.

The participants conveyed an experience of nature as reconciling the density of matter, with the fine-tuned energies associated with spirituality. Another aspect of nature associated with spirituality was *beauty*. One participant stated: “The beauty of nature simply points to God.” Because nature displays the inherent beauty of life, experiences in nature, such as listening to the birds, absorbing the power of a waterfall or feeling the gentle flow of the river, were frequently defined as spiritual experiences in- and of themselves.

Sound and Healing Practices

Many participants described the use of sound to help facilitate spiritual experiences. Singing, chanting, shamanistic drumming and Tibetan singing bowls were described as tools that break down the barriers of entering a meditative state, and help elevate the body’s vibration in order to harmonize with spiritual energies. Because sound enables the body to relax and let go of tension, sound is often used in spiritual healing practices. Receiving and/or giving healing emerged as a recurrent context of the participants’ spiritual experiences. In addition to sound,

the participants' descriptions illustrate a variety of healing practices. ThetaHealing, ReconnectiveHealing and HeartHealing were among the frequently mentioned methods. Although these methods may be built on diverse philosophies and demand different approaches, the general idea is that the healer functions as a catalyst for spiritual energies. One participant described the transcendent experience of giving healing the in following way:

I can feel a pricking sensation in the palm of my hand. I often get very warm...very physical feeling. I may also sense a cold wind entering the room. I can get images in my mind and I often feel like there is something else, outside of myself that takes over and directs the energy. It's like I'm being worked through.

In accordance with other spiritual practices, healing methods provide techniques for promoting spiritual experiences. Although these methods may be aimed to facilitate health related experiences, participants' descriptions often emphasized the *healing in having spiritual experiences*. The relationship between spirituality and health as experienced by the participants – will be detailed in the sections below.

Summary of Theme 1: Theme 1 shows how the participants' understanding of spirituality has emerged through a search process, by comparison to traditional religion, transcendent experiences and spiritual practices. In describing their spirituality, the participants consistently referred to their spiritual experiences, which indicate that experience forms the basis of the participants' spirituality. Spiritual experiences were typically described as transcendent experiences of some type of connectedness. Although characterized by being of a spontaneous and unpredictable nature, the participants utilized the occurrence of spiritual experiences by engaging in various spiritual practices.

4.2 Coping and Empowerment

Embedded within the participants' stories was a profound sense of responsibility for their health and wellbeing - in which spirituality was portrayed as a source of coping and empowerment. This theme will show how spirituality inspires holistic thinking and provides resources to overcome challenging situations. Coping and empowerment is further tied to the role of spirituality in finding existential meaning, as well as a source of protection and

guidance. The last two sub-themes, self-improvement and helping others, will show how spirituality motivates personal growth and promotes a desire to make a difference in the lives of others.

4.2.1 Power of Perception

In this subtheme, the participants discussed the influence of spirituality on their perception of health, and further elaborate on how they use this understanding to take control over their lives. A holistic approach to health became evident as participants underscored the importance of bridging emotions, mind, body and spirit. One participant pointed to health as multidimensional by stating: “Health is not just eating salad and drinking lemon-water. You have to take care of your soul as well.” The role of spirituality was portrayed as an underlying influence with relevance for all aspects of the human sensory experience.

The spiritual connection provides a clarity that embraces every aspect of the human being; the emotional, intellectual and the physical - it sharpens sensual impressions, such as sight, breath and smell, and it becomes easier to think, feel and move.

Spirituality has actually been an experience of receiving more light into my life. I feel freer, happier, and healthier. Everything has actually gotten better. I have this all-encompassing freedom in my life.

Participants indicated that spirituality has greatly affected the way they perceive health, primarily by highlighting the importance of spiritual, emotional and mental balance for physical health and wellbeing. One participant reported: “I understand more of the connection between body, mind and spirit. Because everything is so closely related, all aspects must be cared for in order for me to be well.” A central dimension of the participants’ perception revolved around the idea that disease and illness in reality point to unresolved spiritual and psychological issues:

I believe disease, for example, cancer, is a reaction to emotions that are stuck in the body...so healing occurs when we release the emotional blockage that caused the disease.

It’s our thoughts that kill us...that’s why when we begin to connect it all, when we become whole and secure in our emotions...I’m very preoccupied with emotions, because, when we connect with our emotions, our thoughts calms down and our bodies becomes happier and healthier too.

In discussing the notion that physical illness emerges from underlying psychological factors, the participants often emphasized the body’s natural ability to heal itself, which is a topic that

often revealed an explicit scepticism toward conventional medicine and the use of pharmaceuticals. “Doctors only treat the symptoms and not the cause” was a recurrent statement in the interviews. One participant shared how she came to trust the natural processes of the body when she was diagnosed with an inflammation in her feet, whereupon her doctor prescribed antibiotics for her. The day after she was prescribed antibiotics, she arrived at a course (in holistic health) she was participating in which she told the instructor that she had to take antibiotics for the inflammation. She recalled the dialogue that changed her perception in the following way:

[Instructor]: Do you really have to take antibiotics?

[Participant]: Yes, my legs are inflamed

[Instructor]: What is an inflammation, really?

[Participant]: I don't know, what is it really?

[Instructor]: It's your body working with stuff it needs to resolve, so if you take the antibiotics, it will slow down the body's natural processes which will eventually start all over.

This conversation led the participant to stop taking the antibiotics. Since her recovery, the inflammation has not returned - despite her doctor's warning that if she did not take antibiotics it would turn chronic. She declared: “I don't really need doctors anymore.” An obvious linkage between spirituality and health emerged through the participants' discussions of healing. Healing in this context was described a continuous process of facing challenges and working through mental constructions and difficult emotions attached to those challenges, rather than a quick fix of symptom relief. One participant shared how she first experienced the healing in recognizing the interconnectedness between mind, body and spirit. During a course in ThetaHealing, she discovered that her chronic migraine was connected to a subconscious sense of responsibility for her younger relative. She explained that this healing technique employs muscle testing to uncover the nature of the problem. Muscle testing involves the healer asking questions, while the person who is supposed to receive the healing responds, with the muscle's response indicating the underlying cause of the problem. By asking questions and listening to the body's response, the person is able to move deeper and deeper into the nature of the problem, in order to release its impact:

When he moved on to why...what's the trauma...it turns out that on a soul level...and this is the spiritual aspect of it...I had taken full responsibility for that sister. It was simply too much for a child. He [the healer] asked: Are you ready to let this responsibility go? – Yeeeees, I answered.

Although I still get headaches, they don't come near the level of pain they used to. I don't throw up anymore. It's a lot better.

Someone else explained how she typically evokes self-healing when she experiences abdominal pain:

I just lay down with one hand on my stomach and the other on my chest and I breathe quietly and visualize that all the pain in my stomach leaves, and that love enters in. Then I ask: What is it that this painful feeling is trying to tell me? Then I receive the answer and move deeper into the feeling, stay in it for a while, then I ask the angels for help. The angels are already standing there, so they provide a lot of energy, and the pain usually dissolves.

Listening to the signals of the physical body was often described as a pathway to improved health. Because signals expressed through the body were believed to be indicators of deeper spiritual or psychological issues, many participants experienced that they could control their health and wellbeing by communicating with the body. By uncovering the meaning of the body's signals, the participants are able to take charge and reprogramme the way they respond in challenging situations. The revelation that they can control their health by releasing and transforming negative thoughts and emotions was accompanied by an immense feeling of inner freedom. One participant described how she regained control over her mental health by letting go of a state of depression during a healing session:

He [the healer] was doing something with his hands in my aura when he asked me if I was willing to let go of my depression. And I was so ready for that. So I let it go and the fact is, I haven't been depressed since that. I can get sad, and I can come close, but I'm not going to let it in...so I'm actually not depressed. I'm happier and better.

When asked how she manages to not let the depression get a hold of her, she answered:

I feel that I have to be conscious of it now and say: no, thanks - go away. It's like there is this dark emotional cloud that is just there and if you're not paying attention it will enter your body and pull you entire mood system down... and when it pulls you down, everything just becomes darker and darker. So I'm very attentive, I refuse to let it in.

The strong emphasis on taking control and making conscious choices for themselves demonstrates a profound belief in *the power of the mind*. "It's your thoughts that create your reality," was a recurrent statement in the interviews, whereupon spirituality was portrayed as the medium through which they have come to realize this. One participant described how she directs her intention to what she wants to manifests in life:

You have no idea how much power you hold as a human being. It's all about your ability to envision what you want. For example, in November I walked around telling myself that I have money in abundance, money loves me, money comes to me easily. It took two days...then my mother called me and said she felt like giving me 90,000 kroner (laughs). It's all about...I mean, if my mind would've focused on the fact that I really don't have any money, then that's what I would've continued to materialize.

Because the human mind was believed to be the creator of reality, a positive outlook on life was an important basis for creating a desirable life. One participant adamantly declared that she refuses to let her circumstances drag her down. She gave a vivid example of how she uses her perception to transform her experience of living with a number of diagnoses:

Like with Bechterew's disease, it's painful and I get stiff. The pain is relieved with health products, so that makes me generally healthier, and the stiffness goes away with exercise. What can be better than exercise? It's great, now I have to work out. Then there is the Celiac disease, and that can be really dangerous if I don't stay away from gluten...so I thought well, I have to stay away from horrible flour, which is really unhealthy anyways...Oh my God how healthy am I going to be with all that exercise and proper diet (laughs). Then, I was diagnosed with Lupus, which manifests itself as an inflammation in the inner organs...what in the world can be positive about having Lupus...but I found one thing...I have to eliminate all my stress-factors, because stress increases the level of Cortisol, which is a stress hormone that destroys the health because it triggers inflammation. So there it is, through my diagnoses - I will live a healthy, fit and stress-free life.

Later in the interview, she stated: "If I didn't have a spiritual awareness, I would probably be on disability and taking prescription drugs for all my diagnoses." By actively using their minds to take control over their thoughts and emotions, the participants found it easier to master their lives.

4.2.2 Strength and Calmness

In addition to empowering the participants' perception and desire to take control over their experiences, spirituality was described as a source of profound inner strength and calmness. The participants conveyed a general feeling of increased emotional stability, which was contributed to their experiences with spirituality and spiritual practices. This was evident through the following responses: "Through meditation, I've learned to become an observer of the things that happen in my life. I don't panic so easily anymore" and "The spiritual connection provides me with this indescribable feeling of inner peace." Others explained that spirituality really helps to make life less frightening, and that they've embraced a more relaxed attitude towards life in general.

Several participants described how they invoke the spiritual connection during stressful situations in order to maintain a sense of balance, despite rising anxiety. An occasional performer spoke of her crippling stage fright: “Every time, I say a prayer inside. Help me, so I can get through with this. It’s uncomfortable and I’m terrified, but nobody notices. It seems like I’m totally in control.” Another participant explained that she gets anxious in public places. She stated: “When that happens I try to connect with the spiritual, because it always calms me down – it’s like the stress dissolves or something.”

Accordingly, a number of participants pointed out that their health is entirely dependent on retaining a spiritual connection, because it alleviates the impact of stress so effectively. One participant living with chronic illness described it the following way:

I believe that if it wasn’t for the spiritual connection, neither my body nor my health would’ve endured. Every time I regain the [spiritual] connection and it is maintained long enough to relieve the stress, then that which promotes disease disappears. Stress is the starting point for all of my health issues.

In contrast, one participant emphasized the importance of maintaining a connection to logical thoughts during times of stress. She explained that although she may, in a weak moment, reach out to higher powers, she does not lean on her spirituality for help. She stated: “I try to focus on breathing myself calm, because it’s the loss of breath that creates stress.” Others similarly articulated that they still struggle with staying calm and spiritually connected during times of stress. One participant described the relationship between spirituality and emotional stability in the following way:

It depends on the level of stress, because if you are really stressed out and tired, finding that spiritual place inside isn’t always easy, I mean, I do sometimes, but I wish I did it more, but there is something about that inner knowing...of being a part of something bigger which is related to prayer and not having to carry it all on my own.

4.2.3 Spiritual Surrender

Sometimes, it is neither possible nor desirable to stay calm and in control. A number of participants shared experiences in which the level of stress and emotional pain were described as *too overwhelming*. Whether through instant trauma, such as the sudden loss of a loved one, or emotional compromise and accumulated strain over a long period of time, at some point, these participants decided to surrender their struggles. Spiritual surrender was described as the intentional act of letting go of control, thereby opening up for the possibility of divine

intervention. One participant described is “as an act of allowing myself to be weak,” and further explained that those moments of being able to let her feelings of hopelessness and despair flow through her body always leaves her feeling renewed and empowered. Someone else stated: “It’s as if God says, finally – now will you let this pain go?”

One woman described how she experienced a sudden inner transformation when she surrendered her challenges regarding a difficult relationship to God in prayer. She explained that even though she understood the nature of these struggles, the relationship did not improve. Eventually, it became such a heavy burden, that she one night broke down in tears. In her words, this is what she experienced:

I just collapsed one night, and wholeheartedly asked God for help - what am I supposed to do? And that’s when I received the answer. I have never experienced anything so special in my entire life...He took all of it. I don’t have to take responsibility for her anymore. I was free of that assignment. He took it all. I don’t have to do anything anymore. Before I was always thinking: “I can’t do it,” “What am I supposed to do?” So, I finally let go of it all...then I cried some more, and I literally felt it moving out of me...I mean physically, it was as if it bubbled out of me, and it felt so good. It was so liberating. I mean I was on my knees praying and crying. That was such a powerful experience. The responsibility was completely gone. It felt like heaven entered the room.

In that moment she was completely relieved of her burden, which empowered her to finally sever her ties to this person, while still maintaining a feeling of complete inner peace.

Surrender was also associated with forgiveness. Some describe forgiveness as an essential virtue that cannot be accessed without the practice of surrender. “Forgiveness is an ongoing process of letting go of guilt, anger and resentment,” one participant explained. Another participant shared how healed from the trauma of her ex-boyfriend’s suicide because she reached out to the divine, in the spirit of forgiveness. Because of the difficult nature of this relationship, his sudden death had left her struggling with intense feelings of guilt. Shortly after his death, she intuitively sat down by herself and began to pray for forgiveness. She described how she experienced the power of forgiveness in the following way:

In that moment...it was the biggest thing I’d ever experienced. I felt showered in love. I could physically feel it...like raindrops on my skin...it was so beautiful you have no idea. It was the universal all-encompassing agape love. That’s what I experienced.

4.2.4 Existential Meaning

This subtheme describes the role of spirituality in finding existential meaning. The theme centres around two clusters that illustrate how spirituality: (1) triggers a shift from body to spirit identification; and (2) organizes the human experience according to a spiritual plan.

From Body to Soul Identification

A prevalent dimension of finding existential meaning was the experience of moving through a transformational shift from *body to soul identification*. The participants in this study no longer think of themselves as bound by the limitations of their physical bodies; rather, they identify as souls having a bodily experience. Many embraced reincarnation as a conceivable theory and perceived of the soul as an immortal essence, or a divine energy, journeying through various realms of existence - gathering experiences in order to learn and grow. The body is merely a vehicle, often depicted as “a car that can be replaced,” a belief often associated with the concept of reincarnation. The experience of being an immortal soul was depicted as a mind-altering revelation. One participant described the impact of an out-of-body experience the following way:

When I was out of my body I experienced a revelation about being more than a body. I was the same. I had my consciousness and my thoughts intact, even though I wasn't in the body. That was a powerful experience of not being a body. I have a body, but that's not who I am. I am Soul. That experience left me feeling completely liberated.

She further demonstrated the expansion of her consciousness by describing it as a move from a binocular-like vision to a wide-angle view. From this experience arose a deep inner knowing that there is no death. She stated: “There is no beginning and there is no end. Life here on earth is merely one aspect of the journey.” Others referred to their communication with the dead as significant evidence that the soul outlives the physical body, such as this participant who shared what the spirits have conveyed to her:

I believe in life after death, because I have received answers [from spirits]. What I have been told is that nobody is capable of imagining what it's like before they get there. We are not supposed to know because our soul is here to evolve. I also believe that we have been here over and over...and that we chose our lessons.

Several participants gave detailed descriptions about their encounters with spirits of deceased people. Contact with the dead was commonly described as a multisensory experience evoking a wide range of feelings. Smell was frequently mentioned as an indicator of someone

emerging from the other realm of existence. The communication with spirits was described as a kind of telepathic communication, through an exchange of thoughts between the spirit and the person, and/or the appearance of images in the participants' minds. Some also reported hearing them: "It feels like I get a description in my ear," someone stated. However, the common experience is one of confirmation - that life continues after death. Some participants described this as a crucial revelation for relieving existential anxiety:

As far as life and death are concerned, I feel completely free now. Of course, I still want to live as long as possible, but it's not so hard to think about leaving this life, when you know that you will move on to new experiences...It has given me a greater sense of calm.

I ever since I was a little girl, I've been afraid to die, but I'm not anymore...not at all. It's almost as if I've had this fear all my life...one day it will happen...I mean this pops up in everybody's life from time to time, but I don't experience that anymore. I have this peace about it.

A Spiritual Plan

The understanding of oneself as an immortal soul was further linked to the notion that their lives unfolded according to their personal destiny. Because the participants thought of themselves as a part of a bigger whole, for them it naturally followed that life occurs according to an over-arching plan. The participants consistently talked about how the soul chooses to experience certain events in order to grow. One participant stated: "I believe we make a contract for what we desire to learn, but we don't get to choose how we learn it." A related notion was that we, humans, are not victims of destiny. Instead, our life experiences are given to us upon choice, and are designed by our own souls in agreement with one another, and Source/God. This applies for both positive and negative life events. Because pain and suffering were perceived as being chosen by their own souls as part of the path towards spiritual realization, the participants were able to find coherence and meaning in the seemingly meaningless through their spiritual beliefs. "I believe everything happens for a reason," was a common statement made in the interviews. One participant described her take of predestination in the following way:

I believe in spiritual contracts...I mean, you will meet the people you are supposed to share significant experiences with...and if you had known how many defeats you were going to receive on this planet... I mean, you wouldn't want to know that (laughs), but those failures happen in order for you to grow, right? If you didn't experience pain and failures, it would eventually become a pretty boring life.

Because a person's destiny unfolds across several life spans, unresolved karma from previous lives influences the present moment. Several participants described how past-life experiences had manifested themselves in their current lives. By connecting to spirit, usually through meditation and/or by receiving healing, past lives memories sometimes surfaced and were brought to closure. These participants reported that by becoming aware of past-life experiences from previous lives, they had gained a deeper understanding of themselves and their lives. Below is an excerpt from one interview that sheds light on one participant's experience with past-life memories:

[Researcher]: How does recalling past life memories affect you?

[Participant]: It feels good. When I release the sorrow connected to them, it always feels good

[Researcher]: Are they often related to sorrow?

[Participant]: Yes, because I've been taken back to things that I struggle with today

[Researcher]: Do you see a connection to the life you live today, and those past lives?

[Participant]: Yes, it is scary...really...how past lives shape you...like that Christianity, how awful I think it is, and that is because I have been tortured by priests in the past... burnt and drowned...so yeah that stuff sticks.

Recalling past-life memories enabled the participants to make sense of their own reactions toward certain issues. One participant stated that recalling past life experiences positively affected her sense of wellbeing by making her more relaxed about her own life situation. She stated: "It's a bigger picture...it's me over a super long period, that way everything has a cause." The experience that life transcends death and unfolds according to a spiritual plan was also described as something that makes life worth living – the very foundation for finding meaning in any aspect of life. One participant expressed the significance of her spiritual beliefs for finding meaning in the following way:

If we only have this life and then we die and are gone, it becomes really hard to find meaning in life. I mean, of course you can say that every moment is gold, and that in itself is meaningful, but for me it's really difficult to find meaning unless there is something bigger...when you think of all the unfairness and everything that goes on in the world, it [spirituality] is absolutely necessary in order to stay put on this earth.

This illustrates the relevance of spirituality in finding meaning despite the obvious pain and suffering in the world. Another participant, who also viewed life in terms of personal destiny, emphasized the danger in constructing spiritual explanations for the purpose of finding meaning in the pain and suffering of the world on a general basis. She expressed great concern for the possibility of being misunderstood about this issue, and clearly stated that she

does *not* embrace an attitude of “you chose this yourself.” Rather, it is a fundamental feeling somewhere in these painful experiences that one is supposed to live through, and learn from. Several participants also emphasized the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of the entire universe as a major influence on our individual lives. Because the universal source is in all things, everything is interdependent, and since earth is part of a broader planetary context, it naturally follows that life here on earth moves according to the energies of the surrounding celestial bodies. Although the participants signified, with certainty and conviction, that they had found answers and meaning to existential questions through their spirituality, many emphasized that these beliefs were not final. By embracing an open-minded approach to life, they are always prepared for new insights and revelations that may alter their perception of life.

4.2.5 Trust and Protection

The participants conveyed feeling a deeper sense of trust and protection as a result of their experiences with spirituality. Many confidently expressed that they have come to the realization that the universe always knows what is best for them, which highlighted the importance of mastering the skill of listening to the subtle messages from Spirit or spirits. By promoting a feeling of being guided in life, spirituality has sparked an awareness of an inherent intentionality in life. Learning to discern the significance of information coming from transcendent sources such as dreams, intuition, sudden insights and visions, was described as a difficult, yet important skill to master. Visions revealing what is going to happen, right before it happens, along with a strong gut feeling, may be warning signs that require to be acted upon. These messages often concern other people, which make it even more complicated to deal with. Many expressed feeling a sense of responsibility in that they have access to information that affects others. “It won’t let go until you find a way to respond,” one participant explained. The common understanding is that they receive these signs for a reason:

Some [spirits] are very quiet and reluctant, while others are better at articulating themselves. They may show me certain objects, like a jacket or a shrine, which may mean something, or it could be sentences that pop up in my head over and over that are not mine... when that happens I get this urge to act on it - it won’t leave me alone until I do.

When asked how she is able to discern between her own thoughts and impressions coming for the spiritual, one participant answered: “It’s when it just pops up without me thinking about it.

I've learned to see the difference over time.” Another guidance experience was typified by some of the participants as “living in the flow”. In the flow, there is a feeling of being aligned with the universe, whereupon everything falls into place. One participant described how she changed her life by trusting the spiritual undercurrents guiding her life:

I was in a spiritual process when I sold my house. I sold my house and had no idea where I was going to move. I didn't even look for a place to live either. I just felt the [spiritual] connection and put my stuff into boxes, got rid of everything I didn't need anymore. I completely trusted that the place I was going to would come to me. So...the house got sold, a move-out date was set... suddenly one day I just ran into some people that offered me a place to stay in their community. I lived in that community for years, and it was just what I needed at the time.

The participants conveyed that the experience of spiritual guidance typically fosters feelings of security, trust and protection, and provides their lives with meaning and direction. One participant described it as “feeling safe in the most vulnerable moments”. A related experience involves a general feeling of certainty that life will turn out exactly as it is supposed to. This is described in the following statements:

I know I receive [from spirit]. I trust that even if I don't get what I want, I mean... I might not want what's right for me. I trust that those [spiritual powers] around me, that help me, know what's right for me. So I can ask for things to happen, but I won't receive anything that's not good for me.

If I'm meant to change things in my life, I will get help to make the necessary changes. As long as I don't see any signs indicating change, I'm confident that I'm at the right place.

By trusting that they live in a world governed by a higher order, the participants feel confident that that they will receive guidance at the right time. As a result, they are less worried about the future, and more embrative of the present moment.

4.2.6 Self Improvement

Spirituality as a journey of self-improvement was a recurrent theme in the interviews. This aspect of spirituality was described it as both challenging and rewarding. The common experience is that spirituality drives them towards a continuous strive to evolve into better versions of themselves. One participant explained that: “Everything is perceived through the spiritual context in which the outer circumstances are merely a reflection of the situation on my inside.” Others similarly indicated that various challenges function as a motivator for

personal growth. This means that the participants used their circumstances and other people as indicators of what they need to pay attention to in themselves:

I know I meet people that have a lot of the same challenges as I do, so I tend to see those around me as mirrors of myself. It's usually things I have to work with inside myself that I see in them. It makes me deal with my more unpleasant aspects.

Relationships are my biggest triggers. Relationships kind of set the stage, because they push all my buttons, they bring all my shadows to the surface. When I'm presented with a challenge, that's when it's revealed... what I still need to work with and process in myself.

Several participants spoke about the importance of becoming aware of their "shadows" in order to make profound improvements. Shadows were described as the darker aspects of the self that reside deep within, often hidden from the conscious mind. Anger, jealousy and hate were frequently mentioned as shadow aspects that needed to be dealt with. The common explanation was that fear is the common essence behind each shadow, and painful and difficult feelings are indicators of that which needs to be resolved within. One participant used jealousy as an example of how she works on her shadows:

It could be that other people show a lot of jealousy around me and that I'm annoyed thinking: Oh my god she's always jealous, it drives me crazy. When I see things that irritate me about other people I begin to wonder what is going on inside me. Maybe I'm jealous too sometimes. So I usually contemplate it for a while, trying to feel the feelings of being jealous, examining them and treating them as a friend. I always try to ask what purpose they have served...it could be that they've protected me from something else. So I thank them for that, and tell them that I don't need jealousy in my life anymore. Then it's usually gone, and I don't meet that anymore.

The pathway of self-improvement was described as a continuous process of soul-searching and contemplation in order to recognize and transform fear-based reactions. Several participants pointed out that the improvement process was an ongoing organic and non-linear journey of development. One participant described it as a consciousness spiral in which we all move up or down according to our development. She stated: "There is no right and wrong path. I learn by gaining new insights and perspectives of myself and my life journey, but it's not like it's possible to measure how far I've come." She continued to explain that the organic process of development involves some side-stepping every now and again: "My experience is that if there are things I've skipped or avoided to look at, I feel as if I'm being taken back in order to resolve what I didn't see or realize the first time." Others similarly expressed that

striving to achieve improvement often involves setbacks, and that life will always provide some kind of friction that sparks growth.

4.2.7 Helping Others

A central experience associated with the participants' spirituality was an intentional move towards transcending the ego. One participant said: "I don't focus so much on what I can get for myself anymore, it's more about what I can give to the world." Others similarly indicated that they were making changes in their life in order to serve a higher purpose. The following statement illustrates this experience: "I know I'm not going to continue working in my current job. I'm going to get an education within holistic health, because what I really want to do is help people." All the participants in this study described spirituality as a source of inspiration to help others - both individually and collectively. Many conveyed having an urge to share their spiritual insight by teaching and organizing community meetings, and/or offering individual guidance to others:

"I just want to help others to become comfortable in their own bodies, and for them to learn how to use their intuitive voice. I want to make this [spirituality] easier to grasp, make it natural. I want people to be able to integrate it into their lives without over-consuming it. There are so many people out there that want help now, so I'm going to set up a group, why continue with one-on-one sessions, when I can help ten people at the time?"

"I love working with it [spirituality]. It is so rewarding to be able to help others. That's what keeps me going...really. It's so exciting when they come back and confirm that the information I've received is correct. It helps my self-esteem and confidence as well."

While some had been established practitioners of certain spiritual disciplines for years, others were still exploring how to make a launch out into their community. The inspiration to help others was deeply connected to the experience of having a mission or an assignment to fulfil here on earth. One participant connected the activation of her healing hands to a wish she made upon watching a meteor shower outside. Later on, after discovering that her hands could channel healing energy, she began thinking: "Is this a coincidence, am I supposed to do something, do I have an assignment?" Several participants explained that they were being used (by spiritual powers) to engage in collective meditations and healings destined to raise the overall frequency on earth. This was portrayed as more of a "hidden" way of contributing to the evolution of humanity, as illustrated by the following participant:

Because I've agreed to be a light worker, I'm often used as a channel to send love to others places on earth. I've said that I'm willing to do that, so I'm a part of something called "the order of the golden grail." It's not a sect or anything... it's basically an attitude to the world. It's all about sending love to places and people in order to raise the energies on earth.

Several participants pointed out that the best service they can provide to others is to live by example. "You must change yourself first, that in itself will deeply impact the collective," one participant stated. The embracing of a more altruistic and loving attitude was therefore perceived as a service to the whole. Embedded in the participants' stories of inspiration to serve others and improve the living conditions on this planet - was a profound sense of hope and faith - that one day...the world will be a better place to live for all.

Summary of Theme 2: This theme is clustered around the experience of spirituality as a source of coping and empowerment. By highlighting the interconnectedness between mind, body and spirit, spirituality provided the participants with an experience of being better equipped to take control over their health - and life in general. Spiritually was further described as promoting a sense of emotional stability, which buffers the impact of stressful situations. While some experienced this as a permanent inner shift, others expressed having a hard time invoking the spiritual connection during stressful situations. Spiritual surrender was described as a strategy for coping with challenges and pain of a more serious nature; some of those who had gone through major challenges depicted the experience of surrender as one of regaining balance and resolution. A central dimension in this theme was tied to a shared experience of spirituality as a source of finding existential meaning; the participants in this study all expressed a certainty that life transcends death, and that in reality they are spiritual beings with a higher purpose. As the intentionality of life was revealed through the experience of spiritual guidance, the participants had achieved a greater sense of trust and protection in life. Furthermore, spirituality was an important source of motivation and inspiration to strive for the improvement of themselves and others. By transforming their own fears into strengths and victories, and developing skills to assist the lives of others, the participants conveyed an experience of making a difference in the world.

4.3 Physical Impacts

In this theme, the participants focused on the physical impacts of their experiences with spirituality. The two subthemes, *spirituality as beneficial* and *discomfort*, indicate that the role of spirituality in physical health goes beyond psychological pathways.

4.3.1 Spirituality as Beneficial

The data indicate that there are two distinct characteristics of physical benefits from the experience of spirituality: (1) a general feeling of being less prone to illness; and (2) a heightened awareness of the importance of proper diet and nutrition. “I feel healthier and have more energy,” was a prevalent statement in the interviews. Many pointed out that through their spiritual practices, such as receiving healing, giving healing and meditation, they have freed themselves of difficult emotions that could have triggered disease. One participant described this experience by pointing out that her symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis reversed subsequent to her spiritual awakening:

I still feel stiffness in my joints, but it doesn't bother me. I don't get ill. I don't get discouraged, like I used to. I have my energy somewhere else I think. So my health is better...I feel 10 years younger. I really do.

Although the influence of spirituality through psychological pathways was a major focus, participants also reported that spiritual connectedness boosts rejuvenation. One participant described it as “feeling younger and more alive than ever before”. A related experience emerged when some of the participants spoke of spirituality as a direct influence of dietary needs. They conveyed that the spiritual connection makes you crave foods carrying a higher energy vibration, which includes more vegetables, and less meat. The spiritual connection provides an overall feeling of lightness, experienced as an elevation of the body's frequency vibration. One participant described the relationship between spirituality and diet the following way:

When I'm not feeling spiritually connected, I eat more unhealthy foods, but when I feel the connection growing stronger, I eat more pure and organic and lighter foods. This includes less meat and more vegetables, less cooked and more raw foods in my diet. There have been times in my life when the spiritual connection has been so strong that I barely needed food. Because it feels like...when you have a strong spiritual experience, you just want to live as lightly as possible...it gets harder to add stuff to your body that feels heavy.

However, although others also highlighted an increased awareness of incorporating a healthy diet, they did not necessarily connect this to their spiritual experiences. While some explained that they try to eat less meat because it is not beneficial for the earth or the human body to consume large amounts of meat, others contributed their altered eating habits to the ongoing societal focus of eating healthy. Tending to the needs of the physical body through proper diet and exercise was further described as a pathway to strengthen the spiritual connection. “When I move from my head and into my body, it is as if I become more present in myself which also makes me feel connected,” one of the women explained. Someone else similarly described how she experience the link between physical wellbeing and spiritual connectedness:

I am a very stressed person, so I chose to go to yoga so that I have to be still. I do the opposite of what my head wants, because my head wouldn't mind running fast on the treadmill. So I push myself into yoga for the sake of calmness, and then I become healthier in my body...the spiritual energy is also more available when my body is at peace - a lot less stress in my head then.

4.3.2 Discomfort

The participants in this study reported a variety of uncomfortable physical impacts associated with spirituality. A number of descriptions were clustered around the recurrent experience of flu-like symptoms, such as nausea, dizziness and fatigue, following certain spiritual experiences and practices. This was particularly evident among those who identified as psychic and/or highly sensitive persons. Having to cope with the constant stream of impressions, both from the spiritual realm and other people, was described as a difficult and draining experience. However, most participants found that it became easier to manage once they had learned how to disengage and to distinguish between their own thoughts and feelings, and stimuli coming from external sources. Occasional experiences of discomfort related to healing practices and spirit attachments are illustrated in the following statements:

I've gotten physically sick several times after giving healing. A lot of those who come in have had severely painful experiences, and it seems like I don't always manage to get rid of it all right away...so I get sick...tired and nauseous. It helps to vomit and sleep.

Prior to the funeral of an acquaintance I continuously experienced the presence of the diseased. He was totally hyper in conveying how awesome everything is on the other side of life. It just went on and on and on... I felt so sick...my body was heavy and my mind kept churning. Eventually I just said: You have to leave me alone now! That's when it stopped.

Another grouping of experiences displaying physical impacts involved physical manifestations of paranormal activity, often described as random movements of physical objects, the sudden emergence of strange sounds such as humming or footsteps, along with a general feeling of being watched. These experiences were frequently labelled as undesired spiritual experiences, as the intrusion of spiritual phenomena in the physical sphere invoked feelings of fear and intimidation. The following excerpts from the interviews describe this experience:

Suddenly I saw him [her diseased grandfather] in the backseat of my car. That invoked a feeling of: I don't want this! It was too much... I got terrified cause suddenly he's just sitting there laughing in the back seat. I drove right into the curb – I just stood there thinking: Oh my God, it's actually possible to see the dead. It made me realize that I do NOT wish to see them.

It's so scary, I can hardly think about it. Every time I go down the stairs to the basement... right up against the wall... I have to pass something dark on the way down... I always wonder "What is that," it just feels dark, like an imprint of a human being that once lived in the house that is still present somehow.

Someone else shared an uncomfortable out-of-body experience in which she felt intruded by spiritual forces. Her experience occurred while she was in the state of Hypnagogia – the transitional state between being awake and asleep:

I experienced it as something outside of myself pulling me out of my body against my wish and will. I suddenly became very awake and sober in that experience, because my immediate reaction was to stop it. It was a very uncomfortable and very powerful physical experience of being halfway out of my body, so I had actually left a part of my body. However, I knew I had to stop it because I didn't initiate it – something pulled me out of my body. I even tried to call for help, but couldn't get a word out – I was completely frozen. It took me a long time to get back into my body without that external interruption.

Inherent in these types of spiritual experiences was a strong confirming of the existence of powers capable of interfering with the human experience. They also highlighted the many things incomprehensible to the human mind. Therefore, physical manifestations of spiritual forces were often portrayed as humbling experiences, often followed by a newfound sense of caution towards invoking spiritual experiences.

Summary of Theme 3: This theme revolves around the physical experiences associated with spirituality. Physical impacts range from a general sense of improved physical health to flu-like symptoms and fear following certain spiritual experiences. Participants further reported an increased awareness of the importance of physical health for spiritual wellbeing.

4.4 The Self and Society

This theme elaborates on the relevance of spirituality on the participants' relationship with themselves, other people and society in general. The first subtheme shows how personal and social wellbeing is mediated by spirituality through the search for authenticity. Subtheme 2 demonstrates the participants' associations between spirituality and the development of a critical eye towards societal and communal structures. Subtheme 3, highlights the participants' experience of spirituality as a source of social tension, while subtheme 4 describes the experience of spirituality as a source of doubt, and the urge to find explanations that unite spiritual and scientific explanations.

4.4.1 Authenticity

The participant's stories echoed a profound longing for truthful living. As they discussed the importance of becoming (or reclaiming) their true self - the contours of spirituality as a pathway towards authenticity emerged. One participant stated: "Through spirituality I'm constantly learning how to un-learn the patterns of my old socially-shaped self, in order to live life from the inside out." Others similarly pointed out that spirituality has taught them how to live more deeply from the heart – a concept often symbolizing a change in values, in which the participants had moved from a superficial to a more core-oriented attitude. This move typically involved a loss of desire for materialism, as well as an increased awareness of the importance of love, acceptance, understanding and forgiveness. As a result of spirituality guiding them into them into their true nature and highlighting the things of utmost importance, the participants experienced a greater self-acceptance, confidence and inner peace. The following statements illustrate how the participants spoke about the influence of spirituality on their relationship with themselves:

Spirituality is really about being human, it's about daring to move deeper into yourself, and to embrace yourself...and for me personally I feel that the awareness of a

spiritual relationship provides me with self-worth. It's a confirmation of being something more... not just a coincidence.

I have a better view of myself now. I'm dealing with that inner critic on a regular basis, and I've experienced that when I allow myself to be the real me... I mean, I have a big body, right... and I've learned to accept that this is me, and that's nobody else's business.

Another participant explained that her self-confidence evolved from the realization that behind the social mask, there is no difference between people. She stated: "We are all souls with the same need for love. It's not so scary to be yourself when everybody you meet is just like you - a soul in a body." This further points to an interlinking between personal and social wellbeing. In talking about the changes in their inner landscapes, many participants simultaneously pointed out that the way they think and feel about themselves carries over into the social domain. This became evident as the participants reported a notable change in the way they perceive and interact with other people. In particular, the experience that *all is one* was highlighted as influential on their relationship with other people. Because this perception includes the notion of everybody as mutually interdependent, it was portrayed as a buffer for intolerance. "What I do to others, I basically do to myself," one participant firmly declared. Another participant described how spirituality inspires her to look beyond the undesired behaviour of others:

Naturally, I relate differently to other people by seeing them in relation to the spiritual. I see everybody as divine pearls. It doesn't matter how much they're struggling, or how awful they, at time, may be. Because we're all expressions of the same divine power... if you're hurting, it actually affects me too... even if I don't notice it.

Many expressed having developed an increased empathy, and that they look at all people, not just their personal relationships, with a newfound love. This was further associated with developing a more open-minded, flexible and tolerant attitude. Some noted that they've become nicer to others by being more concerned with acceptance and forgiveness, than being right. One participant described it the following way: "I used to be really judgmental, not that I was evil before, it's just that I focus differently now by choosing to see the good in everybody." Several participants described that they are often told that others feel a sense of peace and calm in their presence. One participant further elaborated on how changes in her own attitude have transformed her relationship with her mother. She described how a difficult relationship filled with anger and resentment had improved for the better:

I don't see it that way now. I know that she's done her best. She's been the best mother she knew how to be, and made the choices she felt was right at the time. I have a completely different mind-set now which has taught me to accept and forgive everything that has happened in order to let go of resentment.

She further explained that spirituality has shaped her into becoming more of an easygoing person. She described the recurrent experience of catching herself not reacting in certain situations where she had thought: "Oh my God, why didn't I get upset over that," or "Wow, I've become a different person." Others similarly indicated that spirituality had increased their ability to better understand other people's point of view, which has made it easier to relate and communicate. This is illustrated in the following statements:

I'm more concerned with who you are behind "the social mask" and all that. I believe it helps me communicate better, because I see beauty in everybody, and because that's my focus, I have a tendency to ask unexpected questions that ...I think makes people open up and feel safe. It's easy for me to get to know someone.

I've noticed that I have a different kind of openness that wasn't there before. It's like I see deeper into people. When I interact with someone I see a lot more than the outer impression. It is a kind of heart-to-heart experience which makes me relate differently...like I immediately know more about the person.

The statements above further show that the participants experienced an increased ability to connect with others on a deeper level, through a sense of recognition. Spirituality as a source of finding authenticity involved a piercing through of behaviour and appearances both in themselves and others. This will (or ability) to perceive and relate, past behaviour, social categories and expectation provide the participants with increased understanding and tolerance.

4.4.2 A Critical Eye

The participants consistently spoke of the importance of executing discernment. As a result of their spiritual process, they have developed a critical eye towards certain societal structures. One participant described her spirituality as "a continuous process of finding a healthy detachment to that which doesn't resonate anymore". Although the participants differed in their descriptions of which structures or belief systems they can no longer comply with, the shared experience points to a shift from "outer authority, to inner authority" followed by a tendency to see collective organizations in a different and increasingly critical light. The following statements illustrate this experience:

Because it has made me question my own beliefs, the spiritual journey has made me question both religious and cultural collective belief systems.

It's almost as if I've had this inner knowing to discern what's true and what's false...it's like an inner certainty which gives me the courage to speak up if I feel that something is not right.

I don't have any confidence in doctors and conventional medicine...there is so much fraud in that system, I mean can they really be trusted? It's all about money anyways, that's become increasingly more evident...people have been diagnosed with cancer, even if they don't have cancer these days.

Several participants shared an increased scepticism towards the overall structure of society, especially as far as money and power are concerned. One participant expressed concern with the way money dictates social behaviour:

I think we're all suppressed in order to maintain the financial structure certain people benefit from. I believe that from the day we realize that we don't have to look a certain way, we'll stop buying all those products and we'll get off the weight loss products and stop going to the gym, and start exercising in nature. We'll stop buying fashion clothes because we already have clothes in our closets.

Others expressed a similar scepticism towards the motives of alternative spiritual practitioners. One participant stated: "A lot of it [spirituality], I think it goes to their head. I don't feel like they are in contact with reality." Another participant gave a vivid description of how she saw her spiritual community in a different light subsequent to losing a dear friend. At the time of her friend's death, she was deeply involved in the spiritual community in her hometown. She described how her colleagues approached her upon returning to their shared location changed her perspective on spiritual practitioners:

They [her spiritual colleagues] insinuated that we'd worked so much with the spiritual and that everything happens for a reason that I shouldn't spend all weekend grieving...I should rather go to this course instead. I shouldn't spend time with my feelings in order to accept that someone had died.

This experience triggered a scepticism that caused her to rethink the people in her community:

I started to ask more questions about the people I interacted with. I got very analytical and critical, and I found a lot of copycat tendencies. A lot of them actually sold courses based on material copied from books. That made me sensitive to the difference between the wannabes – those who are only in it for money and recognition - and those who are real.

The participants demonstrate a diligence in their desire to discern from among various sources of knowledge, continuously weighting information against their own inner resonance. Since a central aspect of the participants' spirituality was centred on the search for health sustaining practices, they found it necessary to maintain a distance from collective systems that do not support their desired direction.

4.4.3 Social Tension

Because spirituality provides a change of perception, many participants felt restricted by existing tensions between spirituality and their surrounding society. Although spirituality was connected to the experience of an increased sensitivity and understanding of others, it was simultaneously depicted as a barrier for meaningful interaction. Many described spirituality as such a sensitive topic that they keep their spirituality hidden from people in their social circle. This created an experience of living somewhat compromised, because they feel surrounded by a social environment in which the majority interact from a different point of view. The tension between collective and individual experience was further revealed as the participants expressed their spirituality as something sacred, i.e. an experience they seek to protect and keep safe from potential judgment and critical remarks from those who do not embrace spiritual principles or acknowledge spiritual experiences. One participant described the experience of her spirituality as something sacred in this way:

I am very cautious who I talk about this [spirituality]. I know whom I wouldn't say a word to. Not everybody at work knows I'm a healer either...I know it's just my fear [of judgment]. I mean this [spiritual] is who *I am*. This has actually been so difficult for me that I have two Facebook profiles. I have one that is open for everybody, and one where I have all my spiritual friends - those I have met on different courses, and that shares my views on things. Through that profile I can "like" and "share" all those spiritual things that are of interest to me.

She continued to explain that she had two Facebook profiles because she just did not have the energy to deal with critical comments from people incapable of understanding. She further emphasized that she respected everybody, and certainly was not interested in convincing anybody else to adopt her views. She just did not want to be judged. Similarly, a feeling of always holding something back emerged as a prevalent descriptor. This is illustrated by the following statements:

There is something that keeps me from expressing myself as spiritual in my daily life where there are other people are present. That has always been difficult for me. It is as

if I need someone who supports me and says: "It's okay, you are free to be yourself." It's almost as if I feel stupid or weird or something.

They [her friends] wouldn't understand why I would choose to go this path, they wouldn't see the point, so there is no point in me telling them either, so I just keep quiet. This is actually kind of hard for me...because I'm not sure the friendships would last if they found out, so the contact has diminished...but who knows, maybe one day, I can tell them.

One participant highlighted the importance of respecting other people's boundaries as a reason for not sharing her experiences with others:

I don't talk to my friends about this. It's not like I'm preaching or talking about this when I'm out drinking wine..."Oh look you have this spirit behind you"...I mean I don't do things like that, that I know many do... I have no right to interfere in other people's lives. So I have a lot of respect for this...that there is a power that we don't control... and because I have access to people's information...information they're not necessarily interested in hearing - I take my precautions, because I'm certainly not going to be a preacher for this aspect of my life.

For some, this constriction between the spiritual and the social standards of normality became easier to deal with as their networks changed to include others who have had similar experiences. Finding like-minded people was described as crucial for finding acceptance in the experience of being somewhat different from - and not understood by - others. While many participants have developed strong friendships with like-minded people in their hometown, and hence felt their need for social acceptance were adequately met. Others conveyed feeling rather isolated in their local community, and expressed having a hard time finding mutual understanding, even in the spiritual circles organized locally. The Internet was therefore an important networking arena. One participant described her experience of isolation in the following way:

I have very few people that that I feel I share my understanding, it's a very small network of people that are scattered all over the world. So it's mostly networking through the Internet, by participation in spiritual growth groups, and sharing experiences and reflections through e-mail.

Although spirituality was considered to be a sensitive topic, many participants felt they could discuss their spirituality with their partner or spouse. Some expressed that they have become less concerned with being stereotyped or judged, which has turned the experience of living in a kind of social tension into an interesting and enjoyable experience.

4.4.4 Doubt and Explanation

Spirituality was often portrayed as a recurrent trigger of doubt and inner turmoil, which had interfered with the participants' sense of wellbeing. Perceptual doubt was particularly evident in some participants' discussions of their earliest experiences, in which they described having experiences so beyond ordinary perception that they began to question their own sanity. However, doubt and uncertainty usually dissolved when they were able to construct credible explanations. The following participant described her experience of doubt in the following way:

Every Sunday, I used to wake up to this smell of tobacco, and nobody else in my house smelled it...I became increasingly anxious and remembered thinking: "Now I am really losing my mind" because I had received psychiatric help for years, so I feared having come this far only to completely disconnect...but after a while my curiosity set in, and I began to search for answers.

She continued to explain how she had been playing with the idea that it was a deceased friend who had recently died in an accident. However, one day she met a woman with psychic abilities who told her that it was her dead grandfather that used to visit her from beyond. Her response to this information was described in the following way:

I thought, well, that makes sense, because I had been talking to my grandfather in my mind for a long time and I'd been thinking: "Oh my God, now I'm talking to him (laughs)". Not that I got any real answers from him, because he was such a quiet and modest person, but he was a person I really missed in those days due to all my struggles...so I thought: "That makes sense to me, I can live with that."

Others reported experiencing this dynamic interplay between doubt, faith and confidence in a different way, e.g. such as this person, who depicted the recurrent moments of doubt as a battle between her selfish ego and altruistic soul:

My perspectives have changed, and that is really difficult for my personality, it sometimes creates a tension between my physical and spiritual desires...when that happens I engage in a serious talk with myself. The ego is just afraid of dying, right?

Someone else provided a vivid description of her experience of doubt. It was not her fearful ego or an unusual spiritual encounter that sparked feelings of uncertainty. Instead, it was the realization that she had lived a good life for years *without* feeling a spiritual connection that triggered serious feelings of doubt. Having been passionately religious most of her life, she one day began to notice that she had not paid attention to her faith for a long time.

It was such a strange feeling to experience that I could live like everybody else without thinking about God...and that was fine.

The realization that life could be good without living through a spiritual frame of reference, made a profound impact on her, and activated what she refers to as a “crisis of faith.” She began to seriously doubt everything she had believed up until that point, which she experienced as what she refers to as “collapsing on the inside”. During that period, she recalls spending a lot of time just looking out the windows, trying to find a point of reference or something that could reveal to her how life is possibly connected. She explained that in looking at creation, she simply could not deny that there must be something more than physicality. In acknowledging this moreness of life, she set off on a deep search for spiritual truth.

So I had to start all over again, and of course I started out from within the Christian framework because that’s where I was at the time, even though I had put much of the conservative mind-set behind me...I mean what are you left with when you don’t firmly believe in everything that’s written [in the Bible]? What then to believe? So I kind of scratched it all together on the basis of Creation and that there is a God.

Another participant’s response echoed the others’ experiences of doubt as a trigger for a new and deeper search for meaning:

I’ve experienced lots and lots of doubt...but doubt and confusion is a good thing because it sharpens you, and triggers you, to complete your inner processes... so doubt is actually a key that provides you with the insights you need...so it’s really nothing but a stimuli... because it makes you go deeper and ask more questions. Not that it is experienced as a positive thing when you are deep in the middle of it, but afterwards...I always felt like something really good came out of it.

Because of the elusive and often troublesome nature of spirituality, a number of participants attempted to provide explanations for their experiences. A shared experience of something going on in their mind was evident in the following statements: “There is a fine line between reality and fantasy here” and “I may create these experiences on my own with my thoughts. Who knows, we’re all creative beings.” One participant reflected upon the nature of her spiritual experiences in the following way:

It’s something that goes on in the head. I can’t really describe it, because it’s like describing something without consistency, and that’s very hard...but there is something that happens in your perception...I mean, It’s as if I structure my consciousness in a different way, so that it moves in a different direction and shifts its

focal point...and if I manage to stay there for a while...all of a sudden I feel connected.

This participant continued to explain that she gets somewhat “scientific about it” when she wonders what this feeling of being connected is all about: “Is it just something that the brain does that triggers certain feelings? I don’t know.” Others similarly expressed a need to reconcile their experiences with familiar or more socially accepted modes of thinking. One participant explained an experience of oneness taking place in a group meditation using terms like “molecules” and “frequencies”:

Well, we are nothing but molecules... and it feels like the molecules dissolve and that this heart frequency which circles through the group... through one hand, through the heart and out the other hand and to the next person...that frequency is what transforms individuals into one unit.

The usage of scientific concepts to understand the nature of spiritual experiences relates to a frequently expressed desire to demystify spiritual experiences. One participant explained this in the following way: “It’s the same thing that happens when we die, that happens in for example out of body experiences. It’s nothing mystical about death, it’s natural.” Another participant replied: “I just want to people understand that these [spiritual experiences] are natural experiences.” The participants clearly experienced spirituality as something organic, an invisible divine core immanent in the nature of biology. Although some were at peace with the unexplainable nature of their experiences, others found it more difficult to deal with. This participant expressed great frustration in not succeeding in finding a clear and satisfactory explanation:

There is no *one* teaching that works for me, I don’t have a book, I have no instruction - nothing! It’s not fun to be like this. I miss having a paper or some kind of education or manual telling me what is going on. I do my best to be as normal as possible, I’m a fricking housewife that goes to the gym, buys bread and potatoes...then suddenly... out of nowhere... I find myself in a completely different mode, wherein I receive all this information, and I have no idea where it’s coming from.

The participants’ desire to merge their experience of spirituality with acceptable explanations according to rational, scientific and social standards, underscores a longing for a greater social acceptance. It also served as a strategy to avoid feelings of doubt and uncertainty regarding the nature of their experiences.

Summary of Theme 4: This theme points to spirituality as a nexus between personal and social wellbeing. The experience of spirituality as a pathway to authenticity reflects a sense of enhanced wellbeing and connectedness in both domains – predominantly by diminishing the significance of individual differences. However, spirituality was also found to be a source of critical thinking that further evokes an experience of friction and social tension, thereby making it challenging to establish meaningful interaction and live fully according to one’s personal desires. Lastly, this theme has shown how the perceptual changes associated with spirituality manifest themselves as an experience of doubt, which is followed by an urge to reflect upon possible explanations.

4.5 Thematic Synthesis: The Experience of Spirituality as it Relates to Health and Wellbeing

The core-experience of spirituality is conveyed as an experience of transcendent connectedness – that alters or expands one’s awareness towards a greater understanding of life. Physical limitations dissolve, and there is a realization that life transcends death. “I am a soul inhabiting a body.” The common belief is that all life emanates from a higher power (or Source) and will eventually return to its point of origin. The experience of transcendent connectedness is multifaceted. Some participants described it as a deep inner knowing and being in touch with one’s true inner self. Others emphasized the manifestation of sudden bursts of insight and revelation, a sense of communication with God, angelic beings, the deceased or other types of spirits. Typically, there is a dynamic interplay between the spontaneous transcendent experience and the active cultivation of such experiences through spiritual practices (e.g. meditation, spending time in nature, the use of sound and various methods to help facilitate healing processes).

The participants’ spirituality was deeply intertwined with their health and wellbeing. Their perception of health mirrored their outlook on life, and all the women emphasized that body, mind and spirit are interconnected and interdependent aspects of health. Hence, spirituality was inextricably linked to a search for optimal health. Psychologically, this manifested through an experience of increased control, strength and calmness, existential meaning and coherence, trust and protection, self-improvement and helping others. The physical impacts of spirituality were characterized as both positive and negative, and range from a general sense

of improved physical health to different types of discomfort following certain spiritual experiences. Several participants observed that physical wellbeing is crucial for maintaining a clear connection to the spiritual realms. It should also be noted that the physical discomforts associated with spirituality were typically described as a transitory experience, while the positive impact was of a more enduring character. Moreover, spirituality promotes both personal and social wellbeing by igniting a desire for authentic living. The pathway to authenticity involved the cultivation of love, acceptance, understanding and a forgiveness of oneself and other people. Spirituality was also portrayed as a source of social friction, and a trigger of doubt. Many participants expressed a need to understand the nature of their experiences and sought the attainment of plausible explanations, often through a desire to reconcile their spiritual beliefs and experiences with the scientific paradigm embraced by the majority.

5. Discussion

This chapter contains a discussion of the study's findings, and is divided into five sections. The first section presents an overview of the study's findings. The second section discusses the findings in the context of topics presented in the literature review. The third section addresses the limitations of this study, while the fourth section explores the implications of this study for policy and practice along with directions for future research. Lastly, this chapter close with a conclusive statement.

5.1 Overview of Findings

A phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived experience of spirituality as it relates to health and wellbeing. Through accessing in-depth descriptions of lived experiences, the intent of this study is to generate a deeper understanding of the underlying pathways that mediate the spirituality-health relationship. The participants' experience of the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing is expressed through four major themes: (1) Understanding Spirituality (2) Empowerment (3) Physical Impacts and (4) The Self and Society. Each theme is comprised of multiple subthemes that capture the various aspects of the participants' experiences, as they relate to the specific category. The findings of this study suggest that spirituality is an integral part of the human experience which impacts physical, mental and social wellbeing.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

This section opens by revisiting the meaning of spirituality and its relationship to the concept of health. Next, I elaborate on the role of spirituality in finding coherence, meaning and motivation. The relationship between spirituality and physicality is highlighted, before returning to the social constructivist perspective, and the dialectical process that constitutes reality, individuality and sociality.

5.2.1 Spirituality: A Health Aspect?

One of the central questions in the spirituality-health debate is whether spirituality is an integral part of health or merely an influence (Larson 1996, Chirico 2016). This is a question whose answer deeply relies on *how* the nature of both the human person and spirituality is understood (Morris 1994, Luckmann 1967). In this study, participants consistently described the experience of spirituality as an inseparable aspect of the human person. “Spiritual” was not something they became at some point in their lives; rather, the introduction to spirituality manifests itself as a process of rediscovering who they truly are. It is an experience of coming into contact with one’s true inner self. As the participants’ stories unravelled, a picture of the inner self as a divine and immortal aspect of being emerged. The essential experience of spirituality was that of connectedness to a higher power, one that is both immanent and transcendent - and unites all things living. This corresponds with descriptions in the literature which portray spirituality as two interconnected dimensions of transpersonal and intrapersonal transcendence; while the transpersonal transcendence refers to a vertical dimension of connectedness with the transcendent (God, higher consciousness, etc.), the horizontal dimension of intrapersonal transcendence focuses on the relationship with oneself, others and the natural world (Coyle 2002, Fischer 1999, 2011). However, the participants in this study described the horizontal dimension as a continuation of the vertical. In other words, their sense of connectedness with the transcendent - and the realization of its existence within their beings - triggers a sense of connectedness with others through the notion that all beings have emerged from the same transcendent Soul or Source. Thus, spirituality was considered to be a universal phenomenon in that everybody has a transcendent essence/soul, whether they are aware of it or not. As the participants tied the experience of spirituality to the essence of who they are as human beings, this study corroborates with Luckmann’s (1967) perspective, thereby making a compelling argument for viewing spirituality as a fundamental aspect of human nature - and hence an integral part of human health.

This identification of a spiritual essence inside their beings complies with Fischer’s (1999) location of spirituality as an underlying health dimension, permeating and integrating all other aspects. All participants advocated a holistic approach to health with an emphasis on the importance of obtaining a healthy balance between mind, body and spirit. This was an expected finding considering that holistic health and healing is central to contemporary spiritual explorers (Vincett & Woodhead 2009, McGuire 1993). The strong emphasis placed by the participants on healing or becoming whole as a part of their spirituality, along with the

active usage of spirituality for health purposes, is another indicator that spirituality intertwines with health. A question that immediately arises is whether this invisible dimension conceptualized as spiritual health would be relevant for those who reject the existence of a spiritual essence. As noted by Larson (1996), measures and testimonies proposing that spirituality influences health and wellbeing does not confirm the existence of a spirit. However, in keeping with Luckmann (1967), the spiritual may be understood as that which pertains to “experiences of transcendence” (Luckmann 1990b:127). The human capability of transcendence, which is anthropological condition of religion, is the underlying mechanism that shapes individual consciousness and conscience in social processes. As the worldview of individuals develop through the internalization of socially ordered meaning, the worldview is by nature a non-specific universal form of religion/spirituality (Luckmann 1967:51). More specifically, the spiritual may be conceived of as the ultimate concerns of individuals, i.e. “the basic value around which all other values are focused, the central philosophy of life” (Moberg 1984:151). Correspondingly, Larson (1996) mentions the possibility of examining different worldviews, including secular claims, with regard to spiritual health. In a review of research on meaning-making and health in secular society, la Cour and Hvidt (2010) found that spiritual, religious and secular domains of existential meaning-making have both overlapping and distinctive features. The authors explain that when these three domains are coupled with the three dimensions of cognition (knowing), practice (doing) and importance (being), it is possible to map out the different aspects of people’s worldviews, and discover how these aspects relate to health and wellbeing. The authors specify that although people may hold significantly diverse opinions of these domains, most people relate in some way or another to all the complex domains and dimensions of meaning-making simultaneously (pp. 1297-1298). However, there is no clear clear-cut answer as to whether “spiritual” is the proper term for this existential dimension of health.

5.2.2 Meaning and Motivation

As mainstream medicine has begun to acknowledge that there is a connection between mental and physical health, promoting mental health may potentially protect the individual from developing both mental and physical illnesses (Seligman 2008). Because spirituality so frequently correlates with higher rates of wellbeing and life-satisfaction, and lower rates of negative emotions and mental distress (Thoresen 1999, Hadzic 2011, Koenig 2009, Koenig & Larson 2001, Koenig 2008a, Koenig 2012), a recurrent assumption in literature is that spirituality influences health by enhancing the mind’s healing capabilities (Seneviratne 2003).

The participants in this study all agreed that the greatest influence of spirituality was on their mental wellbeing. As suggested in the literature (Koenig et al. 2012, Fischer et al. 2015), spirituality was especially important for the participants' sense of direction and meaning in life, and for coping with stressful situations. The findings indicate that these women experience that spirituality empowers them to mobilize their inner resources, which helps to prevent stagnation and deterioration from stressors. The role of spirituality in finding existential coherence and motivation to strive for positive development was crucial for coping with both minor and major stressors. Two interrelated pathways from spirituality to wellbeing are recognized: meaning construction and a strengthening of resilience.

Resilience can be understood as a "the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major stressors" (Kaplan, Turner, Norman & Stillson 1996:158). The influence of spirituality on resilience is evident in the participant' descriptions of the role of spirituality in the obtaining of a more solid interior foundation (i.e. inner strength and a deeper sense of calm), which helps to prevent them from succumbing to stressful situations. This corresponds with previous research (Gordon et al. 2002, Wilding 2007, Narayanasamy 2004, Pargament et al. 1998, 2000, 2004, Kim & Seidlitz 2002, Bacchus & Holly 2005) on spirituality and coping with stress. Several participants also spoke of spirituality as a connection to a sacred inner space that provides them with a sense of deep-seated stability. Another aspect of resilience refers to the ability to recover from a breakdown, and also to grow stronger and positively change through adversity (Ledesma 2014, Manning 2012). The subtheme of spiritual surrender is a good example of how the use of spiritual resources can transform a person's experience of helplessness and pain into a state of profound inner harmony. According to Antonovsky (2000), a strong sense of coherence is essential for being able to perceive the environment as ordered, and resist the pressure to collapse from internal and external stressors. As the women described their experiences, all three dimensions (comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness) of a sense of coherence appeared in their stories.

The dimension of comprehensibility is illustrated in the women descriptions of the experience of spirituality as an expansion of mental structures, leading to a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between all aspects of their life, their health included. The prevailing conviction was that disease and illness originate in unresolved spiritual or psychological issues. This was described as an experience of being able to look beyond appearances (Fischer et al. 2015), and having obtained a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of how life operates. Many participants emphasized that spirituality had played a

vital role in accumulating knowledge of the physiological processes of the body, and its natural ability to heal itself. Since spiritual movements are known for fronting that medical causes are insufficient explanations for illness (McGuire 1993), it was not surprising that the women expressed having gained a more complete awareness because of their spiritual beliefs and experiences. The participants described the experience of a transcendent sense of connectedness as a direct source of new knowledge and information. However, many participants also voiced that learning how to interpret and trust the perceived information was an ongoing process. In accordance with findings from Mattis' (2002) study, knowledge from transcendent sources was often conveyed through dreams, visions and intuition, which provided the participants with a sense of trust, protection, insight and answers to important questions.

The second dimension of manageability appeared when the women spoke about having gained increased control of their health and wellbeing, as a result of embracing a holistic perception of health. For some, this involved a shift from being a passive receiver of health-care services to actively engaging in the interpretation of their health experiences. Because spirituality had highlighted the interrelationship between spiritual, psychological and physical states, many participants felt equipped to invoke self-healing processes through methods of accessing the underlying causes to their challenges and ailments. Another aspect of manageability was evident in the recurrent emphasis on positive thinking, which was depicted as an important strategy to take control over their lives. Park (2007) identifies *health locus of control* as a central pathway between religiousness/spirituality and health. Health locus of control involves individuals' view of which factors determines their physical health status. This may include themselves, powerful others, chance and God. Health locus of control is a highly complex construct that accounts for the possibility of individuals holding beliefs in several sources of control at the same time. These different sources of control, as well as how they are viewed, can lead to different health outcomes, which in return results in numerous possible impacts on health (p. 322). Pargament et al. (2000) identify *collaborate religious coping* as one of the methods of coping to gain control, which corresponds to the findings of the present study. Namely, the participants' descriptions of reprogramming the way they think (i.e. transforming negative, life-draining experiences into more positive, life-sustaining experiences) as a kind of collaboration between themselves and the cosmic laws of the universe. Other religious methods of coping to gain control include: Active Religious Surrender (an active giving up of control to God), Passive Religious Deferral (Passive waiting

for God to control the situation) and Pleading for Direct Intercession (seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or divine intercession) (p. 522).

Meaningfulness is the third dimension of a sense of coherence, and consists of both cognitive and emotional/motivational components (Antonovsky 2000:36). Both aspects of meaningfulness emerged through the participants' stories. The cognitive aspect of meaning was highlighted by the active use of spirituality in ascribing meaning to life experiences. Consistent with Hawk's (1994) definition of spiritual health, the participants described spirituality as essential for the development of a coherent worldview that provides them with answers to basic existential questions. A major emphasis was placed on the meaning derived from learning that everything in life is interconnected. By framing their personal lives within a larger cosmic meaning, the participants experienced a greater sense of existential peace and stability, which promoted the will to live and reduced the fear of death. This is in compliance with findings from other qualitative studies (Wilding 2007, Mattis 2002, Naranayasamy 2003), which demonstrate that spiritual beliefs provide people with life-sustaining meaning, inner peace and personal strength. These findings also illustrate the interrelatedness of mental and emotional states (Antonovsky 2000) as increased comprehensibility corresponds with deeper emotional stability.

The concept that life unfolds according to a spiritual plan was described as highly relevant for assigning meaning and purpose to negative aspects and experiences of life. According to Gall et al. (2005), this ability to make meaning is the face of stressful events often promotes successful coping, adaption and wellbeing. However, when framed within a fear-based worldview, spiritual meaning may also contribute to dysfunctional forms of coping, and lead to greater distress (Pargament et al. 2000). Although the participants in this study viewed both positive and negative life events through a spiritual perspective, nobody expressed that they perceived pain and suffering as a punishment from God, or any other external source. Instead, spirituality enabled them to view negative events and situations (e.g. illness, conflicts and loss) as challenges or learning opportunities. Likewise, Strang and Strang (2001) refers to evidence which show that the ability to redefine and extract positive meaning from challenging situations is connected to better disease outcomes (p. 133).

A strong motivational component was evident in the participants' discussions of their desire to realize the potential of their personal spiritual plan. The realization of one's spiritual plan often involved a call for action and evoked an urge to undertake major life-style changes, e.g.

the ending of a relationship, changing jobs or moving to a completely different place. As noted by Pargament et al. (2000), “life transformation” is a key function of spirituality that strengthens a person’s ability to deal with stressors. The experience of coming into alignment with their highest spiritual potential (or life purpose) corresponds with Maslow’s concept of self-transcendence as the pathway to optimal health (Hamel et al. 2003, Koltko-Rivera 2006). In accordance with the literature (Greeson et al. 2011, Tuck et al. 2006, Kristeller 2010), most participants used prayer and meditation as tools to induce a sense of transcendent connectedness, which helped them to overcome the stressors of daily living, and further detach themselves from negative experiences. In a study conducted by Mattis (2002), participants reported that spirituality led to transcendence by allowing people to redefine life’s possibilities. Similarly, the women in this study spoke of transforming their challenges into opportunities for self-improvement- and realization, which was perceived as a necessary step on the journey towards the actualization of one’ spiritual purpose. Kim and Seidlitz (2002) explain that the motivation towards spiritual experience and growth may provide people with a focus and direction to life is maintained despite difficulties and struggles (p. 1387). As such, there may be an inherent health value in the quest for spiritual realization.

Consistent with Hamel et al. (2003), the move towards a transpersonal identity strengthened the participants’ ability to look beyond outer circumstances and had enabled them to act in ways that transcends the “egoistic” nature. All the women reported that the realization of “all is one” dissolves the physical boundaries of individuality and highlights the importance of promoting love, tolerance, wisdom, forgiveness and altruism. This was further reflected in a profound desire to help others, and devote their lives to serving the whole. As such, the participants’ worldview offered them an altruistic and ethical path to personal fulfilment (Hawks 1994). Research confirms that helping others may be beneficial for health and wellbeing because it strengthens feelings of personal control, and decreases feelings of depression (Powell et al. 2003:48-49). Also consistent with literature, the participants’ stories indicate that the path towards spiritual wellness involves a balancing act between inner desires and values, and the ability to live accordingly (Hettler 1976, Fisher 1999).

5.2.3 Spirituality and Physicality

A prevailing conviction found in the literature is that the impact of spirituality on physical health is mediated by the influence of spirituality on mental health, social support and health behaviours (Musick et al. 2000, Koenig et al. 2012, Koenig 2012, Seneviratne 2003, Spinale

et al. 2008)). Accordingly, the women in this study reported that spirituality has led to an overall enhancement of their physical health and wellbeing because of the promotion of a psycho-spiritual approach to healing. For this reason, many participants noted that they were less prone to illness, and had become more attentive to the importance of nurturing their physical bodies. The predominant assumption found in literature, is that health sustaining behaviours are rooted in spiritual doctrine and regularity in lifestyle (Musick et al. 2000:78). In contrast, several participants in this study reported that their spirituality had a direct linkage to physical wellbeing because it alters the body's vibration or frequency - an experience commonly referred as "receiving more light into the body". This was described as a sense of elevation of physiological processes that naturally altered their dietary needs. The relationship between spiritual connectedness and diet was said to be in a state of flux depending on the degree of experienced connectedness. An inverted, but similar description of the direct link between spirituality and physical health, was the recurrent experience of physical drainage subsequent to certain spiritual experiences. A possible reason for the inconsistency of this finding with the predominant descriptions in literature is that the immediate relationship between spirituality and physiology was explicitly linked to the experience of transcendent connectedness. The concept of the transcendent experience is a relatively new frontier in health research, as most studies on spirituality and health have focused on formal spiritual/religious beliefs and behaviour (Levin & Steele 2005). Although there is growing evidence that transcendent experiences during transcendental meditation significantly alters a number of physiological systems (Travis, Tecce & Gutman 2000, Seeman et al. 2003, Powell et al. 2003), more research is needed on the specific relationship between transcendent experiences and health outcomes (George et al. 2000).

A healthy balance between body, mind and spirit was a recurrent theme in the women's stories. In tune with Fisher and colleagues' (1999, 2000) description of the environmental domain as significant for spiritual wellbeing, several women stressed that the experience of connectedness with nature and their physical body was directly related to their sense of spiritual connectedness. Bodily pains, tension or feeling disconnected from the physical body were described as disturbing to the attainment of spiritual clarity. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, physical needs such as proper nutrition, activity, shelter and protection from environment, is required before advancing towards higher levels of health (Hawks 1994, Hamel et al. 2003, Chandler et al. 1992). It may thus be assumed that a certain level of physical wellbeing must be present in order for people to achieve wellness in the other

dimensions of health (Hawks 1994). Also, becoming too preoccupied with spirituality may pose a threat for the other dimensions of wellbeing. As noted by Powell et al. (2003), people who neglect their physical needs because of a strong spiritual focus, might unintentionally sabotage the success of their recovery from illness. Chandler et al. (1992) describe this phenomenon using the term “spiritual emergency”, which refers to the experience of being overwhelmed by the spiritual, or having an unhealthy preoccupation with spirituality, that overshadows the need for wellness in the other dimensions of health (p. 170). Likewise, several participants in this study warned not exaggerate the focus on spirituality to the detriment of the purely physical needs of the body. The participants also experienced that increased physical wellbeing had enhanced their sense of spiritual connectedness, confirming Fisher’s (1999) suggestion that an increase in wellbeing in one domain improves wellbeing in other domains.

5.2.4 Reality, Individuality and Interactivity

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate on whether spirituality should remain within the domain of religion, it should be noted that the shared experience of spirituality as the existence of a transcendent reality certainly overlaps with the bedrock of traditional religion (Koenig 2008a, Maslow 1964, James 1990/1902, Waldron 1998). In the present study, all participants remained adamant about keeping their distance to organized religion (Christianity), since it was associated with a mismatch of spiritual conceptions, undesired social control and an exaggeration of rules and rituals. This is in accordance with Heelas’ (2002) observation that spirituality is an expression of a conscious reaction against existing forms of traditional religion. The women in this study spoke of their personal connectedness with the spiritual realm(s) as a significant source of knowledge. Consequently, they did not rely on a set of fixed ideas imposed by spiritual authorities, but placed a great emphasis of the importance, not only of being open for perceptual changes, but to actively seek new spiritual revelations and insights, preferably through direct experiences with spiritual dimensions. This does not mean that the “spiritual, but not religious” contexts are void of a socio-spiritual hierarchy, but rather that contemporary spiritual teachers focus on conveying their personal spiritual revelations - allowing each individual to uniquely experience and interpret “the spiritual” according to their own preferences and abilities (Vincett & Woodhead 2009, Hanegraff 2009, Heelas 2002). All participants described having gone through a search process that included learning from others with more spiritual knowledge and experience than themselves. Nevertheless, the participants expressed that the

motivation behind seeking external inspiration was primarily related to a desire of learning how to connect with their personal spiritual truth, and to maintain and further develop this connection. This illustrates the strong emphasis on individuality and personal experience, which is characteristic of contemporary spiritual movements (Heelas 2002, Vincett & Woodhead 2009).

As previously noted, the participants often described spirituality as an experience of altered or expanded perception, generally accompanied by positive emotions, such as a joy, inner freedom and peace. This parallels with what is found in the literature on the transcendent experience (James 1999/1902, Maslow 1964, Levin & Steele 2005). Most participants conveyed that they have had spiritual experiences or encounters of such intensity that it had left lasting imprints on their person, often to the degree that it had completely altered their outlook on life. Levin and Steele (2005) explain that transcendent experiences may be distinguished by the level of intensity and duration of the experience. In this study, the experience of transcendent connectedness was described as a dynamic fluctuation between unexpected revelatory peak experiences, and a subtle lingering sense of connectedness, often referred to as “living with an inner knowing” and the receiving of “signs and messages of guidance” from transcendent sources. The women in this study conveyed spirituality as an experience of possessing an entrance to another world – a world containing answers to the great mysteries of life, as well as clues to solve the intricate puzzle attached to the life path of the individual. Great emphasis was placed on the importance of inducing and sustaining the experience of transcendent connectedness, and the participants’ stories echoed James’ (1990/1902) observation that the spiritual dimension works on the personality of those who experience it, leaving lasting effects on their experience of the world (pp. 460-61).

The findings of this study demonstrate the inextricable interlinking between the social and personal dimensions of wellbeing (Brannon & Feist 2007, Larson 1996, Fischer et al. 2000) as mediated through spirituality. Viewed through a social constructionist lens, the spiritual processes of the participants signify a re-socialization of reality that changes their perception of both themselves and other people (Berger & Luckmann 1966). By internalizing spiritual values and beliefs, the participants experienced enhanced self-acceptance and self-love, which had improved the quality of their relationship with others. Many participants also noticed that their spiritual undertakings had improved their communication skills, and gave detailed descriptions of how spirituality had influenced the way they respond to, and interact with others. Expressions such as: “I meet people more with love now,” “I used to be really

judgemental,” “I catch myself thinking - why didn't I get upset over that?” or “I have a different kind of openness,” thereby reflecting the influence of spirituality on the participants' internalizing and externalizing processes.

One of the greatest challenges of this re-organization of reality appears to lie in the objectivated aspect of social reality, and the lack of a social recognition of the “actuality” of spiritual phenomena. Despite the preponderant emphasis on the positive impacts of spirituality on health and wellbeing, many women also depicted spirituality as a source of fear, discomfort and inner struggle. This was often related to the experience of “intrusion” of spiritual phenomenon into the women's consciousness, and/or physical space that interrupted the structures of ordinary consciousness in an unpleasant way. Occasional doubt and confusion regarding the nature of spiritual experiences, whether God or the divine, was described as having a negative impact on wellbeing while it was going on. According to Hill and Pargament (2008), spiritual struggles can be highly distressing because they challenge the most cherished aspects of life. However, in retrospect, the participants in this study viewed these episodes of doubt and confusion as necessary phases of transitioning into a greater understanding and maturity.

In keeping with the assertions of Berger and Luckmann (1966), these experiences seem to break with the unity and history of the logic of their social world, and point to significant aspects of the social structure relevant for the impact of these experiences on wellbeing. In order to understand this, it might be useful to look at the concept of symbolic universes. Symbolic universes refer to the most comprehensive instruments of legitimation, and is depicted in *The Social Construction of Reality* as a “matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings” (p. 114). These are advanced structures of ideological meanings, which integrate experiences coming from different spheres of reality by weaving them together into the same, overarching universe of meaning. Symbolic universes place the individual within a coherent life story, which is necessary for the attainment of comprehensibility. They also determine the relevance of experiences coming from other realms (e.g. dreams, mediation etc.) and helps the transition from one reality to another. As such, they ensure that experiences are structured “in terms of a hierarchy of realities” (p. 115). The participants' descriptions of spiritual phenomena as disruptive to their wellbeing signify a lack in the overarching universe of meaning that structures the secular societies of the western world. A common thread in the participant stories was the problem of finding plausible explanations to make sense of their experiences. The struggle to find the appropriate language

and conceptualization to convey their experiences in a credible manner reflects the subjective nature of spirituality (Luckmann 1967), and also the shortage of clear and plausible structures for reality definitions that encompass these types of human experience (Berger 1969:156). According to Luckmann (1967), because there is no official unified cosmology that provides people with a universal explanation of existence anymore, spiritual themes tend to originate in experiences in the private sphere. The absence of a coherent worldview to provide answers to existential questions, along with the emotional nature of such experiences, makes it very difficult to articulate their experienced meaning (pp.103-104).

A longing for more accurate models of explanation, as well as a greater acceptance of spirituality by the larger society, was a recurrent theme in the participants' stories. The frequent usage of scientific terminology, along with an emphasis on the naturalness of spirituality, points to the fundamental tension between non-religious and religious logic that characterize Western societies (Luckmann 1967). The scientific paradigm's ridicule and pathologization of religion and spiritual experiences have yielded a social stigma attached to religious/spiritual phenomena (Miller & Thoresen 2003, Koenig et al. 2012), which may cause people to hide their spirituality from others (Narayanasamy 2004). Accordingly, many participants expressed that the public scepticism surrounding spirituality was a hindrance to social wellbeing, creating an experience of being fundamentally "different" from the majority. The need to conceal their spirituality from people in their environments was, for some, both isolating and draining. The participants' experience of spirituality as a far too sensitive topic to discuss with others may indicate that the privatization of spiritual matters (Luckmann 1967) pose barriers to the externalization and communication of things that defy scientific explanation. This is supportive of Kohls et al.'s (2009) findings that spiritual practice buffers the impact of positive but also disturbing spiritual experiences - as those with a spiritual practice are more likely to have an established framework to better integrate unusual experiences (Farias et al. 2013). Kohls et al. (2009) explain that some cognitively disturbing experiences (e.g. losing one's coherent picture of the world, or losing one's mind etc.) can be detrimental when they come unexpected, while they can be positively reframed when met within a spiritual context. Correspondingly, the participants in this study reported an increased sense of wellbeing when they were able to give meaning to their experiences by connecting with spiritual communities and others with similar experiences.

An essential part of the participants' spirituality was the development of a critical discernment of established social structures, and a reorganization of their social networks to include more

like-minded people. This further indicates that spiritual meaning is constructed within socially segregated sub-universes of meaning which oppose the institutional order of the majority (Berger & Luckmann 1966). One participant described it as “finding a healthy detachment to that which doesn’t resonate anymore”. Spirituality was conveyed as deeply intertwined with personal identity, and served as a tool for piercing through the socially constructed layers of consciousness in order to discover the genuine self - one’s true individuality. This preoccupation with spirituality as a pathway to authentic living corresponds with Luckmann’s (1967) observation of modern spiritual seekers as “autonomous” consumers who select certain spiritual themes and integrate them into a system of “ultimate” significance based on their personal preferences. In contrast to the hypothesis of Granquist et al. (2007), none of the women even remotely implied that spirituality encourages unhealthy preoccupations. Instead, spirituality was described as a resource for interrogating the nature of unhealthy patterns of thinking and behaving, promoting the forgiveness of all forms of neglect and/or perpetration from significant others – both past *and* present experiences. Thus, the women in this study expressed that they were more concerned with freeing themselves of unhealthy preoccupations, rather than sustaining them.

5.3 Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be addressed. First, the sample size only highlighted a very narrow portion of the population’s experience. Although the findings may be transferable and descriptive of other people’s experiences, they cannot be generalized to a larger population (Anderson 2010). Second, the participants were all female. Because research indicates that various R/S factors impact men and women differently (Kvande et al. 2015), a more gender-balanced or male dominated sample may have allowed for other aspects of the phenomenon to emerge. Third, the multifaceted and immensely subjective nature of spirituality makes it difficult to adequately capture all aspects of the phenomenon. Spirituality is a highly personal and sensitive topic, and the participants may have been uncomfortable with sharing certain aspects of their experiences. Fourth, the dynamics between the participants and myself during the interviews may have influenced what they chose to share. As detailed in the Methodology and Research Design section, my personal interest and previous experiences with the phenomenon prevented me from obtaining full objectivity – though it may be argued that objectivity is humanly impossible to attain. Fifth, the spiritual

orientation of all the participants in this study swayed toward the “spiritual but not religious” category, which allowed for only a limited aspect of the spirituality spectrum to emerge. If this study had discussed the spirituality-health relationship with people that practice their spirituality from within organized religion, or had incorporated a greater diversity of spiritual orientations, the conversations might have yielded different findings.

5.4 Implications and Directions for Future Research

Although the literature on spirituality and health is rich with descriptions of associations between the two concepts, this study is unique in its broad exploration of the relevance of spirituality for overall health and wellbeing. The findings of this study may be of value for both health-care/social practices and policy development. First, the discovery that many participants conceal their spiritual identities from people in their social circles indicates that there is a need for more knowledge and increased public attention to the nature and content of spirituality. Interfaith dialogue is well-established in Norway through different channels, such as the council for cooperation between faith communities (Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynssamfunn), and the contact group between the Church of Norway’s Council for Ecumenical and International Relations and the Islamic Council of Norway (Kontaktgruppa mellom Mellomkirkelig råd og Islamsk råd Norge) (Døving 2010, NOU 2013). This communication has primarily focused on interfaith dialogue with regard to the integration of immigrants, and between different religions and secularist organizations (Leirvik 2007). In other words, it is the symbolic universes of the organized faith communities that have been scrutinized in public discussions. Although this has been a productive strategy for conflict resolution and common declarations (Døving 2010), more attention is needed to the spirituality of the non-organized “spiritual, but not religious” persons and communities to prevent stigmatization, isolation and social separation of those who do not feel comfortable in pre-defined socio-spiritual patterns. As most participants in this study expressed a profound longing for more openness about spirituality, I want to encourage both religious and other social institutions to expand the dialogical work to include individuals, and smaller unorganized spiritual communities, in their respective societies. Society as a whole could greatly benefit from more openness and conversations about transcendent meanings (Besecke 2005) between people from religious, spiritual and secular contexts.

Second, because spirituality is deeply intertwined with health and wellbeing, it is crucial that health-care professionals and therapists are educated and updated about the significance of spirituality for health and wellbeing – both in general, and for their respective patients’/clients’ lives in particular. Many participants in this study indicated that they would prefer treatments that facilitate the body’s natural healing processes, and would go to great lengths in order to avoid ingesting pharmaceutical remedies. This is important knowledge for medical professionals because if people feel ridiculed or dismissed because they have “alternative” preferences, the distance between medical institutions and spiritually oriented individuals may increase further. On the other side, if people feel like they are taken more seriously, as an expert of their own health, it might strengthen the trust between health-care institutions and patients/clients. An increased recognition and understanding of both the beneficial and detrimental aspects of spirituality may enable health-care providers to facilitate treatments that do not compromise the individual’s personal beliefs and experiences. The recognition of people’s spiritual resources may provide important tools for the promotion of health and wellbeing, whether it is during treatment for disease and illness, or for overall wellbeing in daily living.

Third, the broad aim of this study captures the influence of spirituality on multiple aspects of people’s health and wellbeing. Since the field is dominated by quantitative research based on measures of religiosity, more qualitative research that highlights the meaning and nuances of the relevance of people’s spirituality for health and wellbeing is needed. The field could greatly benefit from more delimited and topic-specific qualitative research, in order to develop a more thorough examination of the relationship between various forms of spirituality and certain aspects of health and wellbeing. Participants in this study often struggled to find the adequate words to articulate the complexities of their spiritual beliefs and experiences. This is supportive of Mattis’ (2002) suggestion that researchers, therapists and service providers should focus on developing methodologies that can capture multiple modes of expression (i.e. verbal, behavioural and visual) in order to produce more detailed and accurate representations of people’s spirituality (p. 318). Research that communicates the complexity of spirituality, as well as the all-encompassing relationship between spirituality and wellbeing, may encourage policy makers and service providers to increasingly recognize and actively promote the spiritual resources of individuals, groups and organized communities.

5.5 Conclusion

This study explored the lived experience of the relevance of spirituality for health and wellbeing. The findings of this study suggest that the relationship between spirituality and health and wellbeing is mediated by four central dimensions: the understanding of spirituality, the role of spirituality in coping and empowerment, physical impacts, and the dialectics between the self and society. Each of the four major dimensions is comprised of several sub-dimensions, which account for the nuances in the participants' experiences. Moreover, spirituality appears to be a central aspect of health that provides a holistic outlook on life and mediates physical, mental and social wellbeing.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Approval from the Data Protection Official for Research

Fra: Kjersti Haugstvedt <kjersti.haugstvedt@nsd.no>
Emne: Prosjektnr: 47137. Betydningen av spirituelle erfaringer for helse og velvære:
En fenomenologisk undersøkelse
Dato: 12. april 2016 kl. 17.38.57 CEST
Til: siri.c.k.n@gmail.com
Kopi: marit.solbjor@svt.ntnu.no

BEKREFTELSE

Personvernombudet viser til endringsmelding og revidert informasjonsskriv til utvalget, mottatt 08.04.16.

Vi har registrert at utvalget endres fra kursdeltakere ved Findhorn, til norske spirituelle. Utvalget vil bli rekruttert via snøballmetode. Vi finner informasjonsskrivet til utvalget godt utformet, men gjør samtidig oppmerksom på at NSD har endret navn til NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata.

Data vil bli innhentet kun gjennom intervjuer.

Personvernombudet viser for øvrig til vår vurdering av 08.03.16.

--

Kjersti Haugstvedt
Seksjonsleder/Head of Section
Tel: +47 55 58 29 53
nsd.no | twitter.com/NSDdata



Harald Hårfagres gate 29
N-5007 Bergen
Norway
Tel: +47-55 58 21 17
Fax: +47-55 58 96 50
nsd@nsd.uib.no
www.nsd.uib.no
Org.nr. 985 321 884

Marit Solbjør
Institutt for sosialt arbeid og helsevitenskap ISH NTNU

7491 TRONDHEIM

Vår dato: 08.03.2016

Vår ref: 47137 / 3 / KH

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 02.02.2016. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

47137	<i>The Significance of Spiritual Experiences for Health and Wellbeing. A Phenomenological Inquiry</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	NTNU, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Marit Solbjør
Student	Siri Christine Kvernmo Næss

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 15.02.2017, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Katrine Utaaker Segadal

Kjersti Haugstvedt

Kontaktperson: Kjersti Haugstvedt tlf: 55 58 29 53

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Avdelingskontorer / District Offices:

OSLO: NSD, Universitetet i Oslo, Postboks 1055 Blindern, 0316 Oslo. Tel: +47-22 85 52 11. nsd@uio.no
TRONDHEIM: NSD, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 7491 Trondheim. Tel: +47-73 59 19 07. kyrre.svarva@svt.ntnu.no
TROMSØ: NSD, SVF, Universitetet i Tromsø, 9037 Tromsø. Tel: +47-77 64 43 36. nsdmaa@svt.uio.no

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. What does spirituality mean to you?
2. Can you tell me how you became a spiritual person? (Can you describe some of your major spiritual influences and how you encountered them)
3. Could you describe a spiritual experience that you have had in your life?
 - What made that experience spiritual to you?
 - How did it make you feel? Any physical sensations?
 - What effect has the experience had upon your life
4. How do you experience spirituality throughout your day?
 - Context
5. How would you describe the influence of spiritual experiences?
 - Beliefs/understanding of the world?
 - Existential answers?
 - Your relationship with others/community?
 - Your relationship with nature/the universe?
 - Your relationship with the transcendent/God?
6. In your own words - could you describe the significance of spiritual experiences for your sense of health and wellbeing?
 - Psychological
 - Negative spiritual experiences
 - Coping
7. Can you describe your spiritual practice?
 - How do you integrate your spiritual awareness in your daily living?
 - What is challenging? What motivates you?

* Is there anything you would like to add about the significance of spirituality and spiritual experiences for your life?

Appendix C: Information Letter and Consent Form

Trondheim 15.03.2016

Forespørsel om deltagelse i forskningsprosjekt

Prosjektets tittel: Betydningen av spirituelle erfaringer for helse og velvære: En fenomenologisk undersøkelse

Formålet med studien

Hensikten med denne studien er å utforske forholdet mellom spiritualitet og helse gjennom menneskers beskrivelser av sine erfaringer med spiritualitet (åndelighet). Prosjektet er en del av min mastergrad i helsevitenskap ved Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelig universitet (NTNU).

Kriterier for å være med i studien:

- Du anser deg selv som spirituell/åndelig
- Du har hatt spirituelle/åndelige opplevelser
- Du bruker din spiritualitet/åndelighet aktivt i hverdagslivet

Hva innebærer deltakelse i studien?

Data skal samles inn gjennom kvalitative forskningsintervju og det er ønskelig å intervju 10-12 personer. Hvert intervju vil vare mellom 1- 1 ½ time. Intervjuene skal foregå som en samtale med fokus på dine erfaringer og opplevelser med spiritualitet og hvordan disse erfaringene kan ha påvirket/påvirker din helse/velvære. Det vil bli stilt spørsmål knyttet til dine personlige spirituelle opplevelser. Noen spørsmål vil fokusere på erfaringer i dagliglivet, mens andre berører betydningen av spiritualitet i perioder med stress og/eller i vanskelige situasjoner. Du vil også få konkrete spørsmål knyttet til innflytelsen av spiritualitet på helse og velvære.

Hva skjer med informasjonen om deg?

Alle personopplysninger vil bli behandlet konfidensielt. Dersom du ønsker å delta vil jeg be om at du signerer en samtykkeerklæring før intervjustart. Du kan uansett når som helst trekke deg fra å delta, uten å måtte oppgi noen begrunnelse. Det ønskelig å bruke båndopptaker under intervjuene, for å få en mest mulig korrekt gjengivelse av data. Det er viktig å understreke at jeg som forsker har taushetsplikt, og det vil bli lagt stor vekt på at enkeltpersoner ikke skal gjenkjennes. Ved prosjektslutt 15. februar 2017, vil alle lydopptak fra intervjuene slettes og datamaterialet anonymiseres. Prosjektet er godkjent av Personvernombudet for forskning ved Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste (NSD).

Publisering

Studien vil bli publisert som en masteroppgave i helsevitenskap ved institutt for sosialt arbeid og helsevitenskap ved NTNU i Trondheim. Det kan videre være aktuelt å publisere hele eller deler av studien som artikler i fag- og vitenskapelige tidsskrift. Alle funn som publiseres vil være fullstendig anonymisert.

Hvis du har spørsmål om prosjektet eller ønsker mer informasjon kan du kontakte meg på telefon eller epost.

Min veileder for dette prosjektet er Marit Solbjør, Førsteammanuensis ved institutt for sosialt arbeid og helsevitenskap, NTNU – telefon: 735 90 220, epost: marit.solbjor@svt.ntnu.no

Med vennlig hilsen
Siri Christine Kvernmo Næss

Kontaktinformasjon:
Epost: siri.c.k.n@gmail.com
Telefon: 405 551 967

Samtykkeerklæring

Prosjekt tittel: Betydningen av spirituelle erfaringer for helse og velvære: en fenomenologisk undersøkelse

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien og ønsker å delta i forskningsprosjektet.

Dato:

Signatur: