RESONANCE WITH THE SPIRITUAL: UNDERGRADUATE FRAMES OF THINKING IN A DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This work unpacks the findings of a qualitative 'inside-outside' research project that sought to understand and compare the perceptions of spirituality as understood & experienced by 10 undergraduate students in one Israeli tertiary institution. The respondents represented the overall current Israeli cultural perspectives, among college aged students. There is growing recognition in the field that "substantial numbers of undergraduate students appear to express a strong interest in spiritual matters" [1]. However, with relatively few exceptions, this interest is rarely met with any degree of satisfaction, conclusion or connectivity [2] finding instead that higher education has been primarily about "intellectual knowledge—the rational world of theory and ideas" [3]. Indeed, Flanagan bluntly states, "the one sector of education seemingly exempt from these concerns with spirituality is higher education" [4]. While there is a relatively larger body of research focusing on religiosity in the tertiary sphere and all of its components, even the most cursory review of this literature reveals that beyond the quantitative work of Astin, Astin and Lindholm [5] there is a great deal of comment but relatively little focused research [6]. One of the key inhibitors in this particular research arena has been the ongoing debate over precisely what spirituality is. This debate too has become an area of intense focus, with a gathering consensus that due to the subjective nature of the spiritual experience, nailing down this concept has proven to be extremely difficult. Insisting that understanding the precise nature of spirituality is an imperative also suggests that overall "little empirical research has emanated which explores this." [7] As for a cross-cultural understanding of tertiary students' perceptions in general, and Israel in particular, an initial literature review reveals only one quantitative research study has been published. What emerged from this study was a framework of viewing spirituality as a 'core of being'. Surprisingly, this perspective was generally situated within a new age frame of perception for all the cultural groups represented, and stood in direct contrast to the socio-religious belief structures of previous generations.

Keywords: Spirituality, undergraduate students, Israel.

1 AN INTRODUCTION INTO MEANING, MODE AND RESEARCH MORAINE

In an international arena that is currently in the throes of rapid shifts and changes owing to a raft of forces such as terrorism, disillusionment with politics, global warming and immigration at an unprecedented scale, it seems to us that the research arising clearly suggests that the younger generations are searching for authentic meaning to their lives [8]. Layered on to these international 'swings and roundabout' changes, is the supposedly empowering nature of technological connectivity in which young people are engaged. It has been suggested that this current generation of adolescents, aged between 10 and 25 years, "is the first generation of digital natives" [9]. These descriptions are often written in a positive modality with the implicit implication that they now have "a different way of seeing the world" [10]. However, there is also gathering evidence that technology is not always beneficial in their identity formation and that at best these generations are 'digital tourists'. In a time of global uncertainty technology may lead to isolation and a deeply complex and as yet not entirely understood mediated understanding of the world around them [11]. Indeed, the 'millennials' [12] as well as all generations X and Y have been labeled as being possibly an international cohort engaged in "bedroom culture" [13]. Taking on Pace's reflections, the answer to the question as to whether this possible isolation and use of technology is a genuine process through which individuals "can search for meaning and sense – what is today called spirituality" [14] is still unknown. Indeed, how young people frame this any understanding of spirituality is still relatively undetermined.

While we are not arguing that technology is the "snake oil" [15] of this generation or humanity in general, it is clear that whatever the enablers and inhibitors are that are impacting on this generation, there is an emerging research understanding that there is some form of trans-cultural flux emerging,

related to a need to find authentic meaning in and for their lives. Emerging from data across the globe, this search for understanding appears to be surfacing, particularly a desire for spiritual understanding. This is no more evident than in data emerging from tertiary institutions as Astin, Astin and Lindholm's [16] large scale quantitative study found, "substantial numbers of undergraduate students appear to express a strong interest in spiritual matters." Along with Nash & Murray [17], their data also revealed that by and large this existential search for meaning is not being met with any degree of success. Indeed, as Flanagan [18] forthrightly states, "the one sector of education seemingly exempt from these concerns with spirituality is higher education."

Notwithstanding many tertiary institutions current reluctance to institute change, as Hyde [19] has suggested there is a great deal of comment but relatively little focused research However, it would appear that perhaps one of the key inhibitors in this particular research arena has been the ongoing debate over precisely what spirituality is [20]. This debate is gaining momentum and is likely to become an area of intense focus, although there is a corresponding consensus that due to the subjective nature of the spiritual experience, nailing down this concept will, and has proven to be extremely difficult.

This paper began when we raised the question amongst ourselves 'what is spirituality?' Emerging from this discussion other related questions included, 'where could we find actual respondents to further explore this possibility of a spiritual search?" Through what methodological means could we dig deeper, and what site or sites could we find that contained a range of sociocultural perspectives?' As will be explained in an ensuing section, following on from this and the research threads and focus of Astin, Astin and Lindholm we chose one cohort at a mid-ranged size college in Israel as a 'convenience sample' [21]. In using a qualitative approach [26], we also recognized that Israel is a deeply storied landscape, and therefore in line with the notion that any research agenda requires a "goodness of fit' with those providing data, we chose a set of methods that provided the means through which each respondent had narrative "room to speak" [22].

Further we aligned the research question with the method, and 'purposefully sampled' [23] the students from Arab and Jewish backgrounds. In many ways, this chosen respondent set of tertiary students represented the broader cultural and narrative spectrum of Israel, as well as the individual cultural narratives of each community. As well, they are embedded in a 'state of being, becoming and belonging', in a country that continues to be a constantly shifting and contested narrative space with considerable storied depth of historical lineage. As Greenspahn [24] contends, these narratives of collective memory are often "at odds with each other and even, sometimes, with reality." Certainly, from the reports in the international media there are constant suggestions that with each political and social shift in this region new boundaries and cultural moraines are being created and then soon recreated.

In the research arena, delineating spiritual shifts has been mainly quantitative with little qualitative digging into the nature of this movement. In fact, it appears that despite Israel being the equivalent of a religious 'ground zero' for the three of the great world's faiths, it seems surprising little has been written about what actually constitutes the concept of past spirituality with a seeming reliance on connection to the past religious constituents and hermeneutic unpacking. In a holistic sense, Said [25] contends that Israel and Jerusalem are both framed by Islam, Christianity and Judaism as "sacred" through a linguistic focus on "sacred soil", "sacred texts" and "sacred history." Shohat [26] asserts that it therefore only natural the inhabitants of this nexus are infused psychologically, socially and emotionally with a "spiritual essence" by virtue of being immersed in the ever-present narrative history and proximity to sacred sites.

With these aspects in mind, following on from our choice of methodological alignment, a focused responsive evaluation of the literature, acting as a reflective analytic foil, revealed that there is a high degree of tension between the rhetoric and the reality. On the on the hand there is a view that in Israel's rapid push towards what Charles Taylor [27] would call "radical secularity," there appears to be a "removal of God or religion, or spirituality from the public space". While this is typical of the spiritual and religious drift internationally, in the Israeli space it has been suggested by researchers such as Ben-Porat [28] that despite cultural shifts there still remains vestiges of religious overtones in the everyday cultural and personal rituals of day-to-day living. In reality we would contend that Israel has become more religious than ever.

Adding to the underpinning complexity of Israel, Mayer [29] believes that despite the deep-seated religious elements of this cultural space there is some evidence of psycho-socio-political shifts with the rise of a "new Jewish subjectivity." The "exile paradigm" of Israeli culture seems to giving way to an

increasing interest in other forms of spirituality [30]. Rich and Cali-Cinnamon [31] and Mayseless Russo-Netzer's [32] quantitative research findings appear to be in-line with Ben Porat's [33] observations that there appears to have been a rapid increase in interest in alternative forms of spirituality. As Ruah-Midbar bluntly states: "New spiritualties are emerging in Israel, but are being ignored by academe" [34].

2 METHODOLOGY: UNPACKING THE RESEARCH MORAINE

The description of qualitative research designs is often unpacked as if the approach from emic inception to a negotiated 'explicitly framed emic-etic' understandings was a lock step process. While we have followed the same pattern because of the need for succinctness, we want to make it clear from the outset that this study was iterative and emergent [35].

As previously stated, the underpinning research design of this project was the qualitative paradigm, as we aimed at "to endeavor to catch a holistic perspective as well as capture the depth of understanding of the respondents" [36]. In this research instance, as part of the ensuing methodological 'goodness of fit' or 'bricolage' [37] we chose a convenience sample-case study framework [38] "as our first obligation was to understand this one case, to maximize what we can learn" [39].

This design methodologically engaged both the data collection and analysis through a variation of the 'inside-outside approach' [40]. This approach enables both "familiarity and affiliation" [41] while simultaneously engaging with process of qualitative distancing of researchers as "outsiders" [42]. With the second author in Israel, and having direct contact and familiar 'insider' knowledge regarding the respondents and their contexts, he had an intimate understanding of their "ways of knowing" [43]. Recognizing the strength of this 'insider knowledge' we were also deeply aware that this approach can also "cross the researcher participant divide" [44]. Hence to ensure sound 'triangulation' or 'crystallization' of the data [45], qualities or 'fairness'] [46] of the data collection and rigor of analysis the first and third authors engaged reflexively with the data as 'outsiders.' This approach allowed 'qualitative distance' [47]. This was not undertaken with a view of seeking to achieve objectivity, but rather provided the opportunity for a 'triptych dialogic' allowing a stepping 'inside and outside' of the data by all researchers. Between us we were able to reflexively discuss the emergent themes [48], by asking questions such as 'what are the core drivers within the data? What language aspects of the data revealed critical understandings within the data and what gerunds accurately described the meaning making processes within the data?' Thus, we were able to negotiate the nuances of the related research literature, refine and conflate apparent initial differences and as stated, 'crystallize the data.'

This methodological 'crystallization' and ensuing melding of the data components were undertaken as synchronistical as possible within the data gathering process and the data analysis. The data gathering commenced with a qualitative questionnaire which was completed by the entire cohort**.** As detailed in table 2 this commenced a 'threefold coding process' [49] which once completed was followed by a series of 'semi-structured interviews' [51] with a 'purposefully selected' [50] set of respondents. This respondent set consisted of 6 females and 4 males.

This continual digging deeper into the data through the crisscross process of reflective discussion commenced an initial unpacking of the initial themes through an overall 'constant comparison' of the data [51]. This was also done with a continual 'responsive review' of the literature. This was shared with the Israeli based researcher who provided extra insights into both the 'emergent themes' [52] arising out of the data and deeper contextual understanding of the developing research base. It should be noted that that the literature review did not drive the emerging categories and codes but gradually illuminated the emergent themes as well providing a reflective foil that underscored the biases and cultural contexts of the researchers. The use of Skype and email enhanced the process of 'constant comparison of the data codes' [53] that each researcher had engaged in individually providing an 'inside to outside' platform of understanding in order to reflexively revisit the emergent framework at each step of the analysis process.

"Working out the connections between concepts and allow the core concept to emerge" [54], more importantly, the diagramming of the data analysis also allowed the researchers "to catch a holistic perspective as well as capture the depth of understanding of respondents" [55]. The following themes represent the final representations arising out of the alignment of the 'storied responses' of the respondents and the analysis process.

3 RESULTS: EMERGING THEMES OF SOUL SENSING

While the small-scale of this study preclude the development of any sense of a 'grounded theory', a surprising aspect of these results was the similarity of understandings and perceptions between the respondents. While acknowledging that there was a spectrum of descriptions, the following themes represent a distinct line of commonality that in it self requires further investigation.

The common elements emerging from within the data clearly indicated that there were several integrated layers related this cohorts concept of spirituality, all of which were related to the process of 'sensing.' As will be explored and explained in each of the following sub-sections, this overarching ideal of sensing was related to a deep-seated awareness related to their belief that spirituality arises initially from within themselves. However, far from being a self-centred process, these students also claimed they were always moving towards a schema that was grounded in 'noticing' and engaging with others and the surroundings. These aspects were components of deep reflection, that for the majority of respondents has been a constant life constituent. "From an early age, I can't tell exactly but I always was looking at the world with the idea of understanding what is happening here" (S6).

It should be noted that the following themes have been teased out of a naturally existing overlapping complexity for the purpose of specific examination. These multifaceted components sensing included:

3.1 Sensing the 'core of being'

While these students revealed they had a deep interest in the notion of heightened consciousness, this sense of spirituality had at its heart the personal belief that spirituality was deeply emotional and relational, which they described as the essence or core of who they were as a person. The first element of this need was the development of an authentic core, or an understanding of who they were. "I think it is emotions and thoughts and reflecting on philosophical questions like what is the meaning of things" (S8). In seeking to attain this, their descriptions were akin to developing a strong relationship with themselves. In other words, this was an acceptance that spirituality is innate, and needs to be acknowledged in order to achieve a genuine sense of personhood. "I think that there is something spiritual in each of us. Whether we are willing to accept it, or not. And it is something that you have to learn to open up to, to learn to investigate something that has a beginning and an end, er… ongoing" (S8).

While this development and acceptance of an authentic self was a life long path, an important conjoined and further enabling feature to their self-determination was the need to develop a positive relationship with others. "The spiritual path I choose in fact affects people around me" (S10). While developing a personal belief system as a deep-seated personal process was key, the 'core of being' they believed this could only fully develop by searching out others that would provide them with insights into how to become more in-tune with themselves. While willing to connect with all of those in their familial and social sphere, people of like minds seemed to act as a springboard in enabling their sense of who they were and their sense of being a connected relational entity. In many ways, this circular connectivity between a sense of self and support by others was at the same time a focus on 'well being' of the inner spiritual self. In describing the connection between spirituality and meaning Students 4 stated: "Life in which you feel satisfaction, aliveness, happiness, love, compassion, acceptance, bursting of joy, desire for life and self-realization. A meaningful life me for is a full and useful life and the desire to get up in the morning. Enjoyment renewed with each moment and life choosing authenticity and listening to my truth."

As stated in the introduction, another lynch pin in this sensing process was the focused internal reflection that each respondent employs, and were able to clearly unpack in the interviews. "It seems to me that the goal of spirituality is to find that internal dialogue" (S1). This reflective listening to 'self' appeared to enable each to sort through the priorities and steps in their spiritual development. It was also clear that these students implicitly trusted in their inner dialogue, as well as this inner sensing in respect to engaging with those who seemed to be enablers of their spiritual walk. (S9) revealed the holistic connectivity needed to nurture this concept of a 'spiritual core' when he stated: "It has to be that first of all the environment supports you and gives you a basis for spirituality. So then if there is a process that you need to go through to be spiritual you can go through it."

3.2 Sensing the moral journey

Related to the notion of emotional engagement briefly mentioned in the previous section, each respondent in this data set seemed to believe that this entire spiritual journey was morally based and

love centered: “We must take a breath and to know that everything is alright and to help others in any way that I can. And to manage my life with love” (S2).

While the concept of ‘love of self’ appeared to be at the heart of the spiritual core, it could be framed as more authentic care of self, which lead to an understanding that this entailed living that sought to serve. “I think if I hadn’t found my direction to life I would suffer. I wouldn’t be on the path of spirituality, to serve, to work in cooperation, to listen, to love, I wouldn’t be good for me” (S4). Hence, it seems that this focus and desire to engage with the concept of authentic love set these students focus on understanding and creating a genuine set of moral principles. As well, engaging with others as support mechanism also allowed them to gain a sense of empathy for others and a deeper awareness that while deeply personal and subjective, spirituality meant that one could not be selfish. While never straight forward or easy, taking care of self and taking care of others Yeah, so many times, yeah, growing up it wasn't that easy and every now and then it was like I was losing energy and I did not want to carry on and I asked myself a lot of times what is the meaning of life. But I kind of found that when I gave to other people it felt good. And I would do that and people would thank me and felt that I could carry on, and that people would love me and I liked that” (S6).

While several respondents had moved into a more religious path, such as maintaining family ties, Buddhism or interaction with the Kabala, all engaged with the basic questions of ‘Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?’ As indicated previously, this was a deeply reflective process and from the respondent’s perspective, far from haphazard. In itself, asking the basic questions of life entailed continual sensory synthesis and re-evaluation of their framework of meaning through which they were attempting to understand their experiences. When asked about this concept of spiritual movement, one student replied: “The answer is around this idea of accepting things and to act but not on the basis of some crazy urge or feeling that something is missing. Rather, something that you progress towards at the right time and in the right place” (S5).

Although each facet of this sensing process appears to be emotionally based, the reflective sensing forces seems to have generated deep curiosity. While admitting this was a constant risk, it provided a life path that imagined possibilities, while growing into one’s self-belief and trust in one’s developing tacit awareness. (S60) summed this up when she said: “I believe that if you achieve something you want to reach something else and so on and there is no end to it. So, the answer begins to form around this that you need to accept things, to act but to act not from a place of strong desire but to think.”

3.3 Sensing the existential moments

Integrated into the concept of the spiritual journey, was key ideal of realizing the importance of existential moments, or sensing key aspects in the immediacy of the here and now. One student summarized the other’s understanding of ‘sensing of the existential’ as ‘noticing.’ While ‘noticing’ often involved one off incidents, they were in fact a threaded line of reflective instances, and were in fact related to being reminded of the overarching questions of a deeper and meaningful life. “I think it has happened many times in my life. Like that’s it? What are we here for? What is our role here? If there is a role and if so what is the role?” (S2). The incidences of noticing were often sparked by talking with others, moments of deep reflection and those unplanned for aspects of deep reflection when suddenly becoming aware of natural beauty. While the spiritual journey can be reflectively throughout, it would appear that these students were also aware of something or someone that was transcendentally above them, and in order to grow that had to be attuned to the possibility of the serendipitous moment that would allow them to recognize a sense of another higher understanding. “There is energy. So, what I see is fine but there is energy that is in everything and is everywhere which influences everything’ (S4). Thus, there was a thread of understanding running through the interview responses that there were experiences in the here and now that allowed them to access and imagine experience beyond the tangible. “Spirituality for me is a belief that there is something deeper in the world, some kind of existence maybe. It is something that makes things happen as they do. Unlike religion for me a belief that there is something that causes things to happen that is beyond” (S2).

3.4 Sensing the spiritual space

For this cohort of respondents, a consistent theme arising out the data was the realization that certain spaces and spatial aspects provided the opportunity to engage in deep reflection and enter into a process of ‘mindfulness’ (S5). While integrated into the existential space of appreciation of natural and man-made beauty, this perceived sensing element was related to a more holistic sensory component. Often related to a sensing of the ‘magical’ (S4), this entailed an engagement process beyond simply

seeing but revealing a capacity within themselves to create their own reality and the positive processes within all of their environments. While transcendent in nature, this aspect of sensing also has a reflective framework of grounding these respondents both in the here and now while simultaneously provident of the reflective means to appreciate the relationships in their spheres. "I am in a new place. I live in cooperation. This basic understanding. I am not below and not above" (S3).

This concept of shared spaces was often deeply imbued with religious meaning, although most claimed they were not specifically religious. Hence, it would seem that these students were not entirely able to escape the physical presence of the religious aspects in their cultural spheres. However, while they claimed to not to be affiliated, these spiritual-religious spaces acted as memories enhancers, and certainly reminders of the narratives associated with both family and socio-cultural belief. "I think that faith gives you a lot of strength from that place, where it is a source of strength to deal with a lot of things" (S5).

3.5 Supporting Tables

Table 1. *Respondent Details*

Pseudonym	***Age***	***Ethnic background***	***Gender***	***Field of study***
S1	21	Christian Arab	F	Psychology
S2	25	Jewish secular	M	Environmental science
S3	24	Jewish secular	F	Education
S4	25	Jewish secular	F	Education
S5	26	Jewish secular	F	Education
S6	24	Jewish religious	F	Education
S7	21	Moslem Arab	F	Human resources
S8	25	Jewish secular	M	Psychology
S9	26	Jewish secular	M	Psychology
S10	26	Jewish secular	M	Environmental science

Table 2. *Coding Phases, Emergent Themes and Data Examples*

Coding Phases	***Data Examples***	***Emergent Codes & Themes***
1. Line by Line Memoing: Application of 'emic' labels	*"It seems to me that the goal of spirituality is to find that internal dialogue. And there to open up I don't think you need tools or meditations, I mean. I don't think you need all the spiritual tools that may be an advantage but you don't need them to reach to yourself spiritually." (*Student 1) *"This is how I operate, I always know what is happening with me. When it is physiological or emotional."* (Student 8)	Attuned understanding; deeply reflective, internal dialogue; reliance on self: believe in transferability of contexts, no substantiation; developing sensing personal responsibility and lack of connectivity with former semantic capital; learning from the past personal tacit experience is precursor, sound enough for decision making.
2. Clustering and collapsing of 'memoed 'labels into 'emergent codes: critical clustering of themes	*"I don't know if I am a spiritual person but there is something about spirituality that I am trying to adapt to myself. To be pure. To be good with good intentions. To become a pure soul."* (Student 6)	Sensing the need for moral code; Clear reflection, constantly stepping back, self and social appraisal: sensing of engagement and engaging with deeper self; a different culture has been confronting; Need to adapt spirituality to self and flourishing of the 'self'; management skills lacking; sure of reflection on self and appraisal; authentic learning for self, self - belief; ideology transfer and changed *perceptions.*

3. Further collapsing of codes/clusters into emerging categories	*"The meaning of my life was to survive. Like a lot of adults, they live to survive. My parents to this day are surviving. By the way unlike the religious that feel they must beg and pray and open their hearts, to reach this energy, I don't work this way. I used to but now I am in a new place. I live in cooperation. This the basic understanding. I am not below and not above."* (Student 4)	Sensing of Holistic connection based on deep reflection. Located primarily in self sensing, an independent model of spirituality as 'Sensing the Moral Journey', 'Sensing the existential' Wondering, dislocation and relational motifs. 'Sensing the need to gain control' over, the spaces of self and within the overall cultures and concerns.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In a cultural sphere that provides the technological opportunities and means to engage with the immediacy of friends and family, and the world at large, the findings of this study reveal that young people in this sphere are also engaging with the deeper questions of life and its meaning. While they are often alone, they are not the 'bed room' generation.' If this cohort is in any way indicative of their peers in Israel, then they are deeply reflective and pro-active in generating an ideological framework that is also deeply spiritual. However, the findings of this small-scale study throw up a raft of questions which include:

- Where did this focus on spirituality arise?
- What do tertiary institutions in Israel need to do in order to cater for this reflexive thinking?

All in all, these young people seem to express a yearning for peace both within themselves and around them. Living in a region of chronic often violent conflict, they reject the cynicism of politics and are consequently deterred from political engagement. The victory of capitalism has left no visible pathways to authentic self-fulfillment [56]. In response, they embrace an individualistic spiritual path to help them find their own way to authenticity. They bravely choose a path that demands both great commitment as well as self-confidence, trust in themselves and reliance upon others. In this way they may have found a pathway to hope.

"I think that regarding consciousness we are maturing with time. At least I see it in my generation, those around me who want to investigate their thoughts and meaning but from the view – what is yours and what is mine but something beyond that" (S8).

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