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Original Article

The Role of Religious Comfort and Religious Struggles in Shaping the Meaning in Life in Polish Women after Stillbirth

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Authors' contributions

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A – Study design; B – Data collection; C – Statistical analysis; D – Interpretation of data; E – Preparation of the manuscript; F – Literature search

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Abstract

Objective of the study: Religion often plays a positive role when a person goes through difficult experiences. The study aimed to show the role of religious comfort and religious struggles in shaping the presence and search for meaning in life in the lives of believing and practicing women after stillbirth. Method: The study was conducted in Poland. Sixty-four women who experienced the loss of a child as a result of a stillbirth that occurred after the 22nd week of pregnancy participated in the study. The following measurement instruments were used: The Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) and The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). Results: The analysis shows that women after stillbirth manifest a high level of religious comfort, a medium level of fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and a low level of negative social interaction around religion. They present a higher level of the presence of meaning in life than the search for meaning in life. In addition, in women's lives, religious comfort has a significant and strong positive relationship with fear-guilt and a negative relationship with negative emotions toward God. Regression analysis shows that religious comfort, negative emotions toward God, and negative social interactions around religion have a stronger, more significant relationship with the search for meaning in life than with the presence of meaning in life. Moreover, as the model indicates, religious comfort has a direct, positive, and stronger relationship with the presence of meaning in life than with the search for it. Furthermore, religious comfort is positively related only to negative social interactions related to religion, which play a mediating role and are positively related more strongly to the search for meaning in life than to the presence of meaning in life. Conclusions: The knowledge gained can help women understand the specifics of child loss. It can foster a better understanding of their emotional states and experiences, especially in seeking psychological and spiritual help. It can be useful for psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and even pastoral workers, as well as others involved in providing support in situations after pregnancy loss.

Keywords: religious comfort, religious struggles, meaning in life, women, stillbirth

Religion is recognised by many researchers as an important source to support the discovery of the meaning in life. It reinforces core beliefs about human subjectivity, points to the purposes of life, and places human life in a broader context. It provides answers to questions related to life, suffering, and death (Batson & Stocks, 2004; Emmons, 2005). The supportive role of religion is often evident in situations of misunderstanding and difficulty, such as the loss of a child, illness, or sudden death (Baumsteiger & Chenneville, 2015).

In the process of developing spiritual and religious life (s/r), it is not uncommon for people to be accompanied by two distinct component states: religious comfort and religious struggle. They relate to spiritual reality and involve man's relationship with God, and they also relate to religious reality and involve religious teaching, religious practices, or the moral sphere. They can also sometimes become a source of comfort, distress, or cause conflict. They involve both the spiritual, physical, and psychological spheres of a person (Exline et al., 2015).

This article will explore the relationship between religious comfort and religious struggles and the meaning in life among Roman Catholic women living in Poland who experienced stillbirth. It will also attempt to demonstrate the role of religiosity in shaping the meaning in life in these women.

Religious Comfort and Religious Struggles

An analysis of the spiritual and religious life (s/r) indicates that the life of a Christian growing in faith goes through three intertwined periods, or states: the quiet season, religious comfort, and spiritual struggles (Głaz, 1995). The first of these fills most of human life. We deal with it when various spirits and unforeseen situations do not litter the soul, so that it can use its natural and spiritual powers freely and calmly (Klass, 2014; Pargament, 1997). Comfort is reassuring, and to console is to bring comfort or relief to someone. Understood in this way, consolation flows from the natural workings of the human psyche and body. No extraordinary intervention of God is needed for its occurrence (Mahmood & Tayib, 2019; Pineau, 2008).

The case is different for spiritual comfort, which is deceptively similar to the aforementioned, but does not come directly from us, but is aroused from outside by God. Religious comfort is a spiritual experience (Głaz, 2023). It takes place when a certain inner stirring arises in the soul, whereby the soul is kindled in love towards its Creator (Krok et al., 2014). Religious comfort flows from faith and strengthens it. On man's spiritual journey, it is a clear sign of God's presence to them and a particular experience of His presence. It demands someone else. It is a state, not a momentary and fleeting feeling or emotion (Gallagher, 2016).

According to some theologians, authentic comfort is a gift from God and reveals many mysteries. A person receives it so that they can grow in goodness (Rahner, 1961). Thus, it is a source of encouragement and tension, integrates and disintegrates, and brings solace (Klass, 2013). It fosters the removal of many obstacles that could sometimes separate one from God. The function of this experience is to strengthen a person on their way to a deeper relationship with God. From a psychological perspective, such an experience evokes a soothing peace and sense of security in a person, reduces stress, allows distraction from daily worries and drudgery, but also becomes a source of additional life energy (Exline & Rose, 2013; Kotlewski, 2009). However, as researchers point out, despite its many supportive benefits, religious consolation can also provide people with a sense of confusion and uncertainty (Głaz, 1995). In the context of stillbirth, religious comfort should not be understood only as a general spiritual state, but as a potential resource used by bereaved women in the process of coping with the loss of a child. In such circumstances, religious comfort may be experienced as a sense of being supported by God, the possibility of entrusting the lost child to God, and a belief that the loss can be integrated into a broader existential or religious meaning.

Living a s/r life can be a source of comfort and support in difficult situations, but it also contains significant potential for internal tensions and struggles. Not only does it provide benefits, but it is also often a source of stress and internal insecurities. Religious struggles are a concept that encompasses a wide range of religious elements (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Wielgus, 2020). They focus specifically on people's beliefs, perceptions, and emotions related to God or a higher power. They concern feelings of guilt about personal sin, doubts about religious doctrine, conflict, religious doubt, tension connecting to matters of faith, bonding with God, relationships with religious leaders, and believers. Most often, these relate to the understanding of God (Szcześniak & Timoszyk-Tomczak, 2020). For example, someone may fear punishment if they believe they have offended God, and experience anger if they see God as cruel or responsible for unjust suffering (Exline & Rose, 2013). Other struggles can be intrapersonal, when people face their own moral failures, when there is a conflict of values and cognitive discomfort; the struggles discussed can also be interpersonal, when there are disagreements between religious communities on religious grounds, undesirable relationships between religious people, or when there is ideological conflict (Bassett & Bussard, 2021).

This kind of experience is a time of trial for the individual, of inner turmoil, resulting also in spiritual purification. Both periods – of comfort and of struggle – are associated with a rich palette of feelings that suddenly come to the fore and permeate all human activities (Kotlewski, 2009). Intense feelings can cause us considerable difficulties because they motivate us to make all sorts of sudden changes (Pargament et al., 2004).

The Meaning in Life

Psychologists of the existential orientation believe that the experience of meaning in life lies at the core of human existence. According to some researchers, when analysing the structure of the meaning in life, it is necessary to take into account its ontological aspect, which concerns the value of life as a good in itself, and its psychological dimension, which refers to the subjective experiencing of life and the experience of life events (Klamut, 2002). Most researchers have defined meaning in life as an individual's belief in the purposeful pattern of the universe and his or her sense that life has meaning (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Frankl (2006) defined meaning in life as the natural human need to find conscious meaning that leads to a healthy and well-adjusted life. It becomes a source of strength for confronting adversity and everyday challenges, and thus has an important motivational function. Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) defined meaning in life as positive valuing beliefs about the coherence of the world and one's own life, which provides a sense of wonder and enjoyment of life.

According to Steger et al. (2008), at its core, the meaning in life refers to human beliefs that human life is meaningful and that it transcends the transitory present. The meaning in life involves its search and presence. In turn, a person defines seeking, which leads to presence, as an activity associated with sustained effort, marked by persistence and intensity in establishing or extending knowledge about the meaning of one's life. Emmons (2005) defines the meaning of human life as some pursuit of meaningful personal goals coupled with values, which everyone can discover and pursue.

Meaning in life is therefore a phenomenon that relates to the way well-being is understood and is part of multidimensional conceptions of the good life (Ryff, 1989). Some psychologists regard the search for meaning in life as a defence or coping mechanism whose main function is to reassure and give a sense of security (Park, 2010, 2022; Popielski, 2008). This mechanism remains extremely important for humans, especially in difficult and threatening situations (Głaz, 2002). Moreover, it protects against frustration and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness (Popielski, 2008).

In existential psychology, it is crucial to confront a person's most difficult life experiences, not just to develop them (Popielski, 2008). Human life experiences can be interpreted both positively and negatively. Amongst the positive ones, we can include the realisation of one's goals and plans, while the negative ones include experiences that are most often associated with personal tragedy, for example, death, suffering, war, illness (Głaz, 2002). A person may also experience a lack of a sense of meaningful existence as a result of life experiences. It is commonly believed that a sense of meaninglessness is the result of a preponderance of negative

experiences over positive ones. The accumulation of negative episodes in life often leads a person to a loss of meaning in life and existential emptiness (Głaz, 2023).

The experience of the meaning in life is of great importance in a person's life, as it affects his or her physical, mental, and even spiritual state. Religious faith gives the feeling that life does not end with death. Discovering the meaning of one's life facilitates overcoming difficulties and overcoming any crises (Kamińska, 2018), and an individual's quest to realise the meaning of one's existence serves the social good (Adler, 1931). Individuals with a realised sense of life can experience more positive emotions, have greater life satisfaction, a sense of autonomy, independence, and control over their environment. They feel that they are responsible for the good things that happen to them.

A sense of meaning in life helps to cope with stress and makes us feel weaker negative emotions (Wolfram, 2023). In contrast, an unrealised need for a sense of meaning in life, which involves a sense of not realising oneself, can influence the development of dysfunctions and also result in the emergence of existential emptiness, understood as the experience of meaninglessness in life. As a consequence, existential frustration may cause symptoms, i.e., somatic illnesses, hypersensitivity, excessive concentration on oneself, and hyperactivity. A person in such a situation adopts a fatalistic and aggressive attitude towards life (Kamińska, 2018).

Research Problem

Stillbirth – as pointed out by researchers (Pisarski, 1997) – is one of the important causes of the inability to carry a pregnancy to term and also to give birth to a healthy baby. According to Polish law, the loss of a pregnancy before the 22nd week is considered a miscarriage, and after the 22nd week, a stillbirth (Regulation of the Minister of Health of April 6, 2020, Appendix 1).

Stillbirth is a process involving many different sensations. In the beginning, there is most often surprise, fear, shock, and despair, then often anger or grief, and in some women, short-term depression, sadness, and despondency. For many women, feelings of emptiness and longing for the lost child and a sense of loss of meaning in life are also not uncommon (Cacciatore et al., 2008; Sikora, 2014). It is estimated that in Poland, approximately 10–15% of all pregnancies end in stillbirth. Data collected from general hospital activity reports show that in Poland in 2023, almost 39,000 women had their pregnancy terminated by stillbirth (Centre for e-Health, 2024).

A study of women after stillbirth found that there was a lowering of mood, a lack of feelings of pleasure, pessimism, and dissatisfaction with oneself (Guzewicz, 2014; Herbert et al., 2022). Women after stillbirth were irritable in social

interactions and tended to withdraw from them, felt anxious about their own health, had lower self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts were present in some subjects. They often blame themselves and feel responsible for the loss of the child (Sikora, 2014). In the case of recurrent stillbirth, the rate of depression is four times higher and the rate of severe stress twice as high as in women without recurrent stillbirth. The loss of the child also induced disorders in the somatic sphere, including sleep disturbances, increased fatigue, lack of appetite, and difficulties at work (Murlikiewicz & Sieroszewski, 2013). Complicated grief may occur after perinatal loss, including stillbirth or the death of a newborn. In such cases, the grieving process can become prolonged and intense, making it difficult for parents to accept the loss and return to everyday functioning – unlike normal grief that usually changes over time and gradually becomes less overwhelming (Zhang et al., 2024).

The severity of symptoms in the women studied depended on their personality and coping style, with women with an anxious personality and an emotion-focused coping style being the main risk group. In this study, patients with an extroverted personality and openness to experience were better able to adapt to a difficult experience, such as a stillbirth. The most important source of support for women after stillbirth was the husband, while in the hospital, the chaplain – their presence and rational approach helped to regain lost control of life (Nuzum et al., 2018). The support shown by close family and friends is also important, and talking is one way of coping with a difficult situation. Other coping strategies for dealing with loss include engaging in work and focusing on the future (Sikora, 2014).

Women after stillbirth also sought strength in religious faith. Unborn child loss was experienced as a test of their faith in God and seen as a way to experience God's love. Faith brought women relief, as well as peace and trust in God as the giver of life. Women did not direct anger after the loss of a child to God, sometimes seeing their own negative feelings as a threat to their faith (Hamama-Raz et al., 2014). Other studies showed that women who had lost a child presented a negative attitude towards God and a low level of relationship with Him, and blamed Him for the loss of their child. Some parents were convinced that God caused their loss and viewed it as God's punishment for their sins (Downey et al., 1990; Guzewicz et al., 2014).

Women after child loss who attended structured religious workshops at least several times a month were significantly less likely to have high rates of depressive symptoms (Mann et al., 2008), and women who had experienced a stillbirth and who regularly attended church, seeking spiritual comfort in prayer, had lower levels of depression and anxiety than women who attended church irregularly. In addition, frequent attendance at church liturgy by parents who had experienced the loss of a child promoted better well-being and lower levels of anxiety (Thearle et al., 1995).

According to some researchers, the event of stillbirth and its associated consequences can paradoxically foster the strengthening of women's mental health, which manifests itself in the search for a renewed, disturbed sense of life, the formation of a more mature identity, the taking of social action in favour of other people, and the concern for the development of one's religiosity (Popielski, 2008; Roberts & Montgomery, 2015). In contrast, attaching too much attention to the negative consequences of miscarriage often leads to the deterioration and weakening of women's mental and religious health (Cacciatori et al., 2008; Krok, 2017).

The results obtained among women after stillbirth are not homogeneous. There is a conspicuous lack of research on the relationship between s/r and the meaning in life among women who have had a stillbirth. Hence, it seems warranted to show in the lives of women with the experience of stillbirth and its aftermath, who grew up in a Christian family and consider themselves believers and practitioners, the composition of the struggles of s/r and their relationship with the presence of meaning in life, and the search for meaning in life. Both dimensions of the meaning in life refer to human beliefs that human life has meaning, that it has some value, and that it transcends the transitory present (Głaz, 2023). The search for the meaning in life, which leads to a sense and conviction of its presence, is related to activity, effort, and the expansion of knowledge about the meaning of one's life (Steger et al., 2008).

Nuzum et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of bereaved parents after stillbirth. The study was based on in-depth interviews and aimed to explore how parents experienced the loss of their baby and what forms of support were meaningful to them. The authors showed that stillbirth was experienced not only as a medical event, but also as a profound emotional, relational, and existential loss. The study indicated that parents often experienced shock, disbelief, sadness, despair, emptiness, and a strong need for their baby to be recognised as a real and significant person. The way in which the diagnosis was communicated, the opportunity to see or hold the baby, the creation of memories, and the attitude of healthcare professionals were described as very important elements of the bereavement experience.

It has been suggested that women believers who have had a stillbirth and who, despite experiencing loss, suffering and bereavement, present a mature s/r that is meaning-making, find it easier to understand the meaning of the painful experience (Głaz, 2023; Krok, 2015; Mann et al., 2010), although sometimes s/r can also be a source of tension and struggle (Exline & Rose, 2013; Roesch & Ano, 2003). In addition, a coherent picture of the world and one's own life is sometimes shaken under certain circumstances, which may include the loss of a loved one, suffering, or death. These events threaten the sense of meaningfulness of one's own life (Popielski, 2008). It has been argued that women who experience a stillbirth, despite

the painful experience, see the meaning of their own lives, need to understand the loss of a child, to see the suffering in a new light, while seeking and discovering a deeper meaning for their own lives (Steger et al., 2009).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how religious comfort and religious struggles are related to the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life among Polish women after stillbirth. In relation to the main aim of the study, six hypotheses were formulated.

It is suggested, hypothesis I, that women believers and practice after a stillbirth present high levels of comfort and low levels of negative emotions towards God, fear of guilt and condemnation, and negative social interactions related to religion.

It is suggested, hypothesis II, that women believing and practice after a stillbirth manifest a higher level of search for meaning in life than the presence of meaning in life.

Religious affiliation is a potential resource to help cope with adversity (Roth et al., 2017). These resources allow for better adaptation to new life situations and better coping with stress, especially in the case of the loss of a loved one. When confronted with negative, disruptive events, people need to cope in order to maintain a sense of a coherent picture of their world. When these circumstances involve things that are most important to a person – life, health, safety—from the point of view of human existence, the situation becomes critical, and the need to make sense of it increases (Krok & Zarzycka, 2020).

It is suggested, hypothesis III, that in the lives of believing and practising women after stillbirth, there is a positive and significantly stronger relationship between comfort and the search for meaning in life than between comfort and the presence of meaning in life.

It is assumed, hypothesis IV, that in the lives of female believers and practitioners, there is a negative relationship between comfort and fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and negative social interactions around religion.

It is suggested, hypothesis V, that in the lives of believing and practising women after stillbirth, religious comfort and fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and negative social interactions around religion have a stronger impact on the search for meaning in life than on the presence of meaning in life.

A coherent worldview is often disrupted by the loss of a loved one, suffering, or death. These events threaten the sense of meaning in one's own life. Individuals affected by this painful experience must understand the loss of a child, view suffering in a new light, and simultaneously seek deeper meaning in the event and their own lives (Steger et al., 2009; Popielski, 2008). Furthermore, research indicates that religiosity not only plays a supportive role in the lives of individuals experiencing illness, suffering, or loss (Krok, 2017; Mann et al., 2008) but also serves an important mediating function (Zarzycka, 2017). The goal was to determine the extent

to which negative religious struggles, such as negative emotions toward God, fear of guilt and condemnation, and negative social interactions related to religion, mediate issues of religious comfort and the presence and search for meaning in life in religiously practicing women who have experienced loss.

Hypothesis VI assumes that in the lives of believing and practicing women after stillbirth, religious comfort has a positive, direct, and indirect, stronger effect on the search for meaning in life than on the presence of meaning in life, with fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and negative social interactions related to religion playing a negative mediating role.

Method

Women Examined

Sixty-four women who had experienced the loss of a baby through stillbirth after the 22nd week of pregnancy participated in the study. The women's ages ranged from 27 to 49 years ($M = 41.87$, $SD = 6.31$). All women were born in Poland and raised in a Christian family. 77.6% of the women declared themselves as believers and 22.4% as very believers.

73.3% of the women had a tertiary education, 20% had secondary education, 6.7% had only primary school. 91% of the women were married, 9% were living single. 86.7% of women have offspring, of which 35% have one child and 65% have two or more children. 41.7% of women have had a stillbirth twice in their lives, 31.8% women once, and 26.5% of women three times.

63.3% of the women believe that after losing a child, they were most often accompanied by sadness, 21.2% of the women by despair, and 15.5% by anxiety. 33.3% of the women surveyed said they received support from family and friends, and 16.7% from a psychologist. 11% of women received support from a priest, and 9% from a support group. 30% of the women surveyed said they did not receive any support.

The study received ethical approval from Ignatianum University in Cracow. An information leaflet was then provided, which indicated the purpose of the study and encouraged women to complete the questionnaires accurately. The recruitment process involved the women agreeing to participate in the study, which was completely anonymous. Eighty-seven women were approached to participate in the study, and sixty-four agreed to participate, so the response rate was almost 74%. All the participants provided written informed consent to complete the questionnaire. Each woman was given contact information if one of them needed additional support. Several women reported that they needed it and made use of the psychological and pastoral support offered.

Research Tools

Women participating in the study after a stillbirth completed two questionnaires to measure comfort and religious struggle, and the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. In order to verify the formulated hypotheses, a quantitative research approach was adopted, as it allowed for the standardized measurement of the analyzed variables and the statistical assessment of the relationships between them. The Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) were selected because they directly correspond to the key constructs examined in the study.

The Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) questionnaire was constructed in an American setting by Exline and colleagues (Exline et al., 2000). It is an authoritative tool used to assess the extent to which individuals experience comfort with God and the types of struggles associated with religion (Exline & Rose, 2013). The scale was adapted to Polish conditions by Zarzycka (2014). It contains four subscales. Religious comfort (PCR) refers to feelings of trust in God, perceiving God as an omnipotent, supportive, and caring person, perceiving faith as a source of strength, harmony, peace, and a sense of meaning. Negative emotions towards God (NEB) include negative feelings towards God, seeing God as unjust, cruel, untrustworthy, and abandoning people. Fear-guilt (LW) refers to preoccupation with one's own guilt, sin, and feeling unforgiven by God. Negative social interaction around religion (NEW) includes negative emotions and relationships with other believers. Items are rated on a 10-point Likert scale (0 = *not at all*; 10 = *very much*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each subscale was $.56 \leq \alpha \leq .96$. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is $.60 \leq \alpha \leq .76$.

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was constructed by Steger and colleagues (Steger et al., 2006). This tool was adapted to Polish conditions by Kosakowska et al. (2013). The questionnaire measures the meaning in life in two time perspectives: the present and the future. The two time perspectives are complementary, as the researchers assume that both the presence of meaning in life and the search for it are important for assessing the meaning of an individual's life as a whole. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions, which were assigned a 7-point Likert scale: from *absolute untruth* (= 1) to *absolute truth* (= 7). The questions in the MLQ-P subscale refer to the presence of meaning in life – they measure the declared, obtained meaning in life and its realisation. In contrast, the questions in the MLQ-S subscale relate to the search for meaning in life, the need for ongoing meaning and purpose in a person's life. Cronbach's alpha coefficient as an indicator of the reliability of the questionnaire for the ten test items was .79. In the current study, for the subscale presence of meaning in life, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .78, and for the subscale search for meaning in life, it was .60.

Results

The data obtained for women after stillbirth on the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) were statistically and psychologically analysed.

Level of Analysed Variables

The results of women after stillbirth were interpreted by referring to the obtained descriptive statistics and psychological data.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Relativity for Variables Obtained on the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) for Women after Stillbirth

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α
PCR	5.62	1.39	.76
LW	4.51	1.44	.60
NEB	4.27	1.44	.64
NEW	3.72	0.75	.61
MLQ-P	5.21	0.93	.78
MLQ-S	4.66	0.97	.60

Note. PCR = Religious comfort; LW = Fear-guilt; NEB = Negative emotions towards God; NEW = Negative social interactions around religion; MLQ-P = Presence of meaning in life; MLQ-S = Search for meaning in life.

The results obtained in the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) (Table 1) show that women after the birth of a stillborn child present a high level of religious comfort ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.39$), a medium level of guilt and fear ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.44$), negative emotions towards God ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.44$), and low levels of negative social interaction around religion ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.75$). On the other hand, results from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) show that women after stillbirth present a high level of presence of meaning in life ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.93$) and a level of search for meaning in life ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.97$).

Correlation Analysis

An *r*-Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to show the correlation between the life outcomes of women after stillbirth.

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients Obtained between Variables Obtained on the Religious Comfort and Religious Strain Scale (RCSS) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) for Women after Stillbirth

Variable	2	3	4	5	6
1. PCR	.77***	-.69**	.13	.38*	.42*
2. LW	—	.71***	.16	.05	-.03
3. NEB		—	.42*	-.29*	-.32*
4. NEW			—	.30*	.36*
5. MLQ-P				—	.56**
6. MLQ-S					—

Note. PCR = Religious comfort; LW = Fear-guilt; NEB = Negative emotions towards God; NEW = Negative social interactions around religion; MLQ-P = Presence of meaning in life; MLQ-S = Search for meaning in life.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In women's lives after stillbirth (Table 2), religious comfort (PCR) correlates positively with fear-guilt ($r = .77, p < .001$) and negatively with negative emotions towards God ($r = -.69, p < .01$) and positively with presence of meaning in life ($r = .38, p < .05$) and search for meaning in life ($r = .42, p < .05$). Fear-guilt is positively correlated with negative emotions towards God ($r = .71, p < .001$). Also, negative emotions towards God positively correlate with negative social interactions around religion ($r = .42, p < .05$) and negatively with the presence of meaning in life ($r = -.29, p < .05$), and the search for meaning in life ($r = -.32, p < .05$). Negative social interactions around religion correlate positively with the presence of meaning in life ($r = .30, p < .05$) and the search for meaning in life ($r = .36, p < .05$). In addition, the search for meaning in life correlates positively with the presence of meaning in life ($r = .56, p < .01$).

Analysis of Regression

In order to show the relationship between the variables analysed, a regression analysis was also carried out. Taking religious comfort and religious struggle as independent (explanatory) variables, and the presence and search for meaning in life as dependent (explained) variables.

In the group of women after stillbirth (Table 3), religious comfort ($\beta = .78$), negative emotions towards God ($\beta = -.77$), and negative social interactions around religion ($\beta = .47$) are significantly related to the presence of meaning in life. They explain 38% of the variance in this variable. Negative emotions towards God are negatively related to the presence of meaning in life, whereas religious comfort

and negative social interactions around religion are positively related to the presence of meaning in life.

Table 3

Relationship of Variables Obtained on the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) with the Presence of Meaning in Life (MLQ-P)

Variable	β	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
PCR	.78	0.52	3.23	.003
NEB	-.77	-0.52	-3.15	.004
NEW	.47	0.51	2.83	.008

Note. PCR = Religious comfort; NEB = Negative emotions towards God; NEW = Negative social interactions around religion.

Model summary: Presence of the meaning in life (MLQ-P); $R = .62$, $R^2 = .38$, Adjusted R Square = .29, $F = 4.49$, $p = .006$.

In the group of women after stillbirth (Table 4), religious comfort ($\beta = .19$), negative emotions towards God ($\beta = -.91$), and negative social interactions around religion ($\beta = .41$) are significantly related to the search for meaning in life. Together, they explain 40% of the variance in this variable. Negative emotions towards God are negatively related to the search for meaning in life. In contrast, religious comfort and negative social interactions around religion are positively related to the search for meaning in life.

Table 4

Relationship of Variables Obtained on the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS) to the Search for Meaning in Life (MLQ-S)

Variable	β	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
PCR	.19	0.56	2.91	.007
NEB	-.91	-0.70	-3.70	.001
NEW	.41	0.53	2.51	.0018

Note. PCR = Religious comfort; NEB = Negative emotions towards God; NEW = Negative social interactions around religion.

Model summary: The search for meaning in life (MLQ-S); $R = .64$, $R^2 = .40$, Adjusted R Square = .29, $F = 4.41$, $p = .007$.

Mediation Analysis

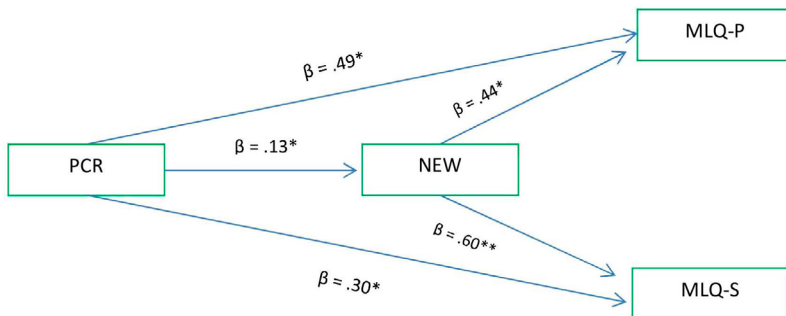
There is no clear answer to the question of the mediating role of religiosity with the meaning in life. A structural equation method was used to examine the complex interdependence, accounting for the contribution of mediating variables.

The initial model included religious comfort (PCR) as an independent variable, fear-guilt (LW), negative emotions towards God (NEB), and negative social interaction around religion (NEW) as mediating variables, while presence of meaning in life (MLQ-P) and search for meaning in life (MLQ-S) as dependent variables. Religious comfort (PCR) was found to be significantly related to the presence of meaning in life (MLQ-P) and search for meaning in life (MLQ-S), with only negative social interactions around religion (NEW) playing a mediating role.

After removing variables with non-significant relationships from the model, a satisfactory model was created (Figure 1). Model fit indices within acceptable limits were obtained. The CMIN/*df* value was 2.26, GFI .91, AGFI .92, RMSEA .06, indicating good model fits.

Figure 1

Model Mediating the Relationship between Religious Comfort (PCR) and the Presence of Meaning in Life (MLQ-P) and the Search for Meaning in Life (MLQ-S) by Negative Social Interactions around Religion (NEW)



As indicated by the model presented (Figure 1), religious comfort has a direct positive relationship with the presence of meaning in life ($\beta = .49$) and the search for meaning in life ($\beta = .30$). Furthermore, religious comfort has a positive relationship only with negative social interactions around religion ($\beta = .13$), which have a mediating role, having a positive relationship with the presence of meaning in life ($\beta = .44$) and the search for meaning in life ($\beta = .60$).

Discussion

The analysis aimed to show the role of religious comfort and religious struggles in shaping the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life in the lives of women after stillbirth who grew up in a Christian family and declared themselves to be believers and practitioners. Hence, the level of religious comfort

and religious struggles, and the level of the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life were estimated, and the strength and direction of the relationship between the analysed variables were shown.

Hypothesis one, which suggests that believing and practising women after stillbirth present high levels of comfort and low levels of negative emotions towards God, fear-guilt and condemnation, and negative social interactions around religion, was only partially confirmed. Women after stillbirth manifest high levels of religious comfort, medium levels of fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and low levels of negative social interactions around religion. This may suggest that the religious comfort element of religiosity dominates their lives and the way they experience their religiosity. At the same time, they are not sufficiently concerned with the development of their own religiosity. God is often treated instrumentally. They are accompanied by a feeling of a lack of forgiveness from God and a sense of guilt, as well as an excess of negative emotions related to their own religiosity. They do not accept issues related to religious doctrine and sometimes feel disillusioned with the religious institution. This supposes, as researchers have previously shown in their work, that people affected by trauma and loss often manifest a reduced ability to perform various spiritual and religious activities, as well as a lack of concern for the development of their religious life (Hathaway et al., 2004).

Hypothesis two, which indicates that women of faith and practice after stillbirth manifest higher levels of the search for meaning in life than the presence of meaning in life, was not confirmed in its entirety. Women present high levels of presence of meaning in life and search for meaning in life, with a higher intensity of presence of meaning in life than search for meaning in life. This supposes that the experience of child loss has not caused a disruption of the meaning in their lives. Women after a stillbirth understand the meaning of their lives, feel subjective satisfaction with their lives, with the activity of sustained effort taking place in their lives, marked by persistence in expanding their knowledge of the meaning of their lives. In line with other research, it has been suggested (Guzewicz, 2014) that in the lives of women with the experience of stillbirth, which brings anxiety, insecurity, bereavement, and sometimes guilt into their lives, their high level of engagement in the process of searching for meaning in life again will be evident.

Hypothesis three, suggesting that in the lives of believing and practising women who have experienced stillbirth, there is a positive and significantly stronger relationship between religious comfort and the search for meaning in life than between the presence of meaning in life, was confirmed in its entirety. This was confirmed by correlation analysis as well as regression analysis. This indicates, in line with previous research (Nuzum et al., 2018), that in the lives of women after stillbirth who have experienced loss, associated feelings of loss, anxiety and disruption of personal relationships, the factor of religiosity, such as religious consolation,

has a positive and active participation in the search for and rediscovery of the meaning in life, and is also a creative factor in the construction of a new perspective on life.

The fourth hypothesis, suggesting a negative and significant association between religious solace and guilt-anxiety in the lives of religious and practicing women following stillbirth, negative emotions toward God, and negative social interactions related to religion, was only partially supported. Religious solace was not significantly associated with negative social interactions related to religion, as confirmed by correlation analysis and the presented model. This indicates that religious solace is independent of whether a person experiences conflict, rejection, or pressure from the religious community. Furthermore, religious solace provides psychological resilience, which allows women to maintain inner peace even when their religious environment is a source of stress. However, religious solace has a significant and strong positive association with guilt-anxiety and a negative association with negative emotions toward God. This indicates a complex process in the development of women's religious life. This may suggest that women experiencing a stillbirth experience a preoccupation with their own guilt and sin, as well as a sense of God's lack of forgiveness (Gallagher, 2016). Furthermore, religious comfort does not protect against guilt; on the contrary, it may increase the likelihood of its occurrence (Stauner et al., 2019). This suggests a paradoxical mechanism in which religious support is closely linked to inner tension, fear of salvation, and harsh self-esteem, while simultaneously protecting against anger or hatred toward God. Often, a person feels imperfect but simultaneously believes that only God can save them, which provides a sense of being loved but is still accompanied by a sense of not being good enough (Wielgus, 2020; Zarzycka, 2017).

Hypothesis five, which suggests that in the lives of believing and practising women after stillbirth, religious comfort and fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and negative social interactions around religion have a stronger impact on the search for meaning in life than on the presence of meaning in life, was only partially confirmed. Fear-guilt is not significantly related to the sense of the presence of meaning in life or the search for meaning in life. As suggested by Tangney's (1991) research, fear-guilt can be both mature and neurotic in nature and, consequently, may not be conducive to, or sometimes serve, the search for meaning in life. In contrast, according to the hypothesis, all three variables – religious comfort, negative emotions towards God, and negative social interactions around religion – have a stronger significant relationship with the search for meaning in life than with the presence of meaning in life. At the same time, negative emotions towards God have a negative and strong relationship with the sense and search for meaning in life. This supposes, as Krok (2017) has previously shown, that religious comfort and negative social interactions around

religion increase the search for meaning in life, while negative emotions towards God will decrease the search for meaning in life.

Hypothesis six, which assumes that in the lives of believing and practicing women after stillbirth, religious comfort has a positive, direct, and indirect, stronger effect on the search for meaning in life than on the presence of meaning in life, with fear-guilt, negative emotions towards God, and negative social interactions related to religion playing a negative mediating role, was only partially confirmed. Religious comfort has a direct, positive relationship with the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. This relationship is stronger between religious comfort and the presence of meaning in life than between the search for meaning in life. This suggests that women who experience religious comfort work intensively to understand the meaning of their situation and pain, using religious faith to do so. Furthermore, religious comfort has a direct, positive, and weak relationship only with negative social interactions related to religion, which play a mediating role. Negative social interactions related to religion have a direct, positive relationship with the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. The relationship between negative social interactions related to religion is stronger in the case of the search for meaning in life than in the case of its presence. However, fear-guilt and negative emotions toward God do not have an indirect, significant relationship with the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. As Zarzycka's (2017) earlier research demonstrated, this study similarly suggests that religious solace intensifies negative social interactions related to religion, which in turn increases tension in the relationship between God and believers. Furthermore, negative social interactions related to religion intensify the search for meaning in life more than its presence. Negative social interactions related to religion (e.g., conflicts within the community, feelings of rejection by the religious group), which are related to the search for meaning in life and its presence, mean that the experienced interpersonal pain directly impacts the individual's existential foundations. Furthermore, they can push the individual to intensively search for new meaning in life, often outside of organized religious structures, which can lead to a change in worldview or individualization of faith. A person simultaneously experiences an intense search for meaning (attempting to understand their difficult situation) and a low sense of meaning (lack of purpose).

Our findings may be referred to the study by Wilski et al. (2024), conducted among patients with multiple sclerosis, which demonstrated that the religious meaning system was positively associated with the presence of meaning in life, but not with the search for meaning. Furthermore, the authors reported a significant indirect effect of the religious meaning system on life satisfaction through the presence of meaning in life, suggesting that religion may function as an important

meaning-making resource in the context of chronic illness. A similar pattern of relationships was reported in Krok's study (2014) conducted among oncology patients, in which the religious meaning system and the presence of meaning in life emerged as positive predictors of eudaimonic psychological well-being, whereas the search for meaning in life showed a weaker association with well-being and, in the regression analyses, was even negatively related to it.

Overall, to further interpret the model obtained, it should be noted that religious comfort influences meaning-making in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it directly strengthens both the presence of meaning in life and the motivation to continue the search. On the other hand, religious comfort is also associated with negative social experiences related to religion, which at first glance do not appear to be beneficial, and certainly not pleasant. However, as noted above, these negative experiences may nevertheless stabilize the sense of meaning and stimulate its further search. Thus, it seems that this more difficult and painful dimension of religious experience may activate a profound process of existential work.

Study Limitations

This analysis brings useful insights to a rarely discussed issue. At the same time, it has some limitations. These relate to the number of people surveyed. The small group of women may have influenced the results obtained. The people included in the study lived in only one region of Poland. Only one tool was used to examine religiosity and sense of life. Moreover, in future research, the relationship between religiosity and meaning in life should be examined among individuals who have experienced forms of trauma other than a stillbirth – e.g., the death of a close family member, divorce, serious illness, infertility, the loss of a job, domestic violence, exposure to natural disasters, accidents, or warfare.

Although the present study adopted a quantitative approach, future research could also benefit from the use of qualitative methods. A qualitative design would make it possible to explore more deeply the subjective experiences of women after stillbirth, including how they interpret religious comfort, religious struggles, guilt, negative emotions toward God, and the search for meaning in life. Such an approach could provide a richer understanding of the personal, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of stillbirth that may not be fully captured by standardized questionnaires. In-depth interviews or narrative analyses could help identify individual meaning-making processes, forms of spiritual coping, and the specific types of psychological and pastoral support perceived as helpful by bereaved women. Therefore, future studies should consider combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a mixed-methods design.

Moreover, future studies focusing on difficult emotional states after stillbirth, such as sadness, despair, anxiety, anger, guilt, and emotional numbness, could be conducted using clinical scales. The instruments used in the present study were designed to assess religious comfort, religious struggles, and the presence of and search for meaning in life. Future research could complement these tools with scales assessing, in particular, depression, anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, and complicated grief after stillbirth.

A final limitation of this study is that all participating women were raised in Christian families, which determines their religious experience. Future studies should also include participants from other religious traditions in order to determine whether the relationships identified in the present study are consistent across different religious contexts.

Recommendations

The analysis of the question suggests several conclusions. In the future, it would be advisable to conduct a similar study among a larger group of people who have suffered a stillbirth, and to apply other tools to the study of religiosity and the meaning in life to obtain a broader view of these two dimensions of human life.

Women who have experienced a stillbirth face many tasks: coming to terms with the loss, dealing with guilt, and rebuilding self-esteem. In such a situation, women have specific needs and wishes; they expect both psychological and spiritual support, which they do not always have from those closest to them (Bubiak et al., 2014). This kind of support should be guaranteed by the family, the psychologist, the doctor, and even the pastor.

The emotional sphere plays an important role in critical situations (Guzewicz et al., 2014). It should not be ignored that there is often a lack of consent on the part of women for negative emotions to arise, which prevents the unpleasant experience from being worked through. Suppression or denial as defence mechanisms often have a high health cost, and unworked emotions can be subconsciously transferred to other areas of functioning, i.e., to motivation or the quality of sexual intercourse (Bielan et al., 2010).

The knowledge gained may, in the future, serve to better understand the specific nature of loss and trauma in women who have lost a child. It may be useful for psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and even pastors, as well as others involved in providing support in situations of child loss. This analysis may also help women themselves better recognize their emotional states, understand their own experiences, and, especially, seek psychological help or other forms of spiritual support.

Conclusion

This analysis explores the complex structure of religiosity and its importance in shaping meaning in life in women who have experienced stillbirth. Faced with constant confrontation with negative circumstances that disrupt their sense of meaning, women after a stillbirth must struggle to maintain a coherent worldview. When these circumstances concern the most important things to a person, such as health, illness, or suffering, the situation becomes critical to human existence, and the need to find meaning in these events intensifies (Batson & Stocks, 2004).

A coherent view of the world and one's own life can be disrupted by certain circumstances, such as stillbirth and the associated trauma and suffering. These circumstances threaten one's sense of meaning in life. Support is often found in religion, although not all research supports this (Shoshan et al., 2024), and it should be emphasized that religion is only one of many potential sources of values that give meaning to human existence (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). There is no room for stillness in the spiritual life, and personal growth often involves reassessing and transforming what no longer serves our well-being. This process can be challenging, but it also offers an opportunity for a deeper understanding of ourselves and our religious beliefs, as the research presented in this article amply demonstrates.

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Conflict of Interests

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