

Women leaders in higher education: a psycho-spiritual perspective

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Abstract

Demands on women in middle and senior leadership positions in higher education institutions inevitably challenge their well-being. How they manage these demands is strongly related to their sense of coherence and their spirituality, constructs that have demonstrated positive relations with general and work-related well-being. This study aims to explore the construction of sense of coherence and spirituality of women leaders in higher education institutions. It adopts a qualitative research approach, applying constructivist grounded theory. The sample comprises 13 academic and support services women working in higher education, who belong to the Higher Education Resource Services South Africa network, a non-profit organisation that promotes leadership development and representation of women in senior positions in higher education. This study contributes to knowledge on gender-specific well-being concepts by presenting qualitative findings on women leaders' life-orientation in terms of sense of coherence and spirituality in a higher education institution in South Africa. Themes from the interview data provide key insights on three subcomponents of sense of coherence: manageability, comprehensibility, and meaningfulness. Spirituality furthermore emerged as constructed in inner-connectedness, trans-personality, and a coping resource in the work context. Meaningfulness emerged as central to the life-orientation and spirituality of women leaders in higher education. Finally, a core theoretical idea is presented in proposing an integrated psycho-spiritual perspective, with meaningfulness as central, grounded in a motivational and relational orientation, and facilitating the potential well-being of women leaders in higher education institutions. Recommendations are made for future research and to inform leadership development and well-being interventions targeting women in higher education.

Keywords

Leadership, life-orientation, meaningfulness, sense of coherence, spirituality, well-being, women

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Career-orientated women are generally confronted with unique workplace challenges (Franks, Schurink, & Fourie, 2006; Martin & Barnard, 2013) and coping with these is related to their mental health and well-being and their spirituality. In this study, mental health is viewed in terms of sense of coherence (SOC), which is defined as a universal life-orientation (Antonovsky, 1979), whilst spirituality responds to the question of how one connects to oneself and others (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002).

Women's mental health and well-being and the psychological and social implications for South Africa have been studied comprehensively (e.g., Fleischman, 2011; Myers, Stein, Grimsrud, Seedat, & Williams, 2008) in connection with violence and diseases (Mayosi et al., 2009) and HIV and AIDS (Wingood et al., 2008). These studies refer to women in rural areas (J. Kim & Motsei, 2002) and townships (Smit et al., 2006) or to clinical contexts (Steyn, Howcroft, & Fouché, 2011), with little attention being paid to the well-being of women in leadership positions in South African higher education institutions (HEIs).

The value of studying the well-being of women in HEIs is clear in light of the increasing number of women with higher education (HE) (Löve, Hagberg, & Dellve, 2011) and the rise of women in leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Leadership is defined as the ability to motivate and influence others to achieve the goals of an organisation (Samani, Koh, Saadatian, & Polydorou, 2012). It is strongly related to the ability to build interpersonal relationships and is regarded as influential in the health and well-being of leaders and employees (Wolf, Huttges, Hoch, & Wegge, 2010). Research on women in leadership focuses on various themes, such as challenges faced in educational administration (Chisholm, 2001) or historical perspectives on women's leadership and its impact during apartheid (Seidman, 1993). These studies compare gender and race in leader behaviour and management (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005), the construction of gender roles in leadership (Streibel et al., 2006), and gender equity faced by women in political leadership (Geisler, 2000). Only a few recent studies highlight well-being in terms of SOC in women leaders in South Africa (e.g., Honiball, Geldenhuys, & Mayer, 2014; Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013), and the HEI context often remains unaddressed. Few studies focus on spirituality in the workplace (De Klerk, 2005), particularly regarding HEIs, and faculty and administrators (Allison & Broadus, 2009).

It has been emphasised that a strong SOC and spirituality – both connected to the meaning of life (De Klerk, 2005) – enhance well-being, stress management, and burnout phenomena in organisations (Mayer, 2011). Both SOC and spirituality promote health and well-being in leaders (Honiball et al., 2014), yet the concepts as well-being resources need further exploration (De Klerk, 2005; Mayer, 2011), particularly regarding gender in the context of HEIs. This study addresses the gap in previous research by specifically exploring how women in middle and senior management positions working in the HE sector in South Africa construct SOC and spirituality as potential well-being resources. A theoretical framework of the study is provided, the research methodology is introduced, findings are presented and discussed, conclusions are drawn, and recommendations are provided.

SOC: a universal life-orientation

SOC generates optimal health and grounds successful coping with life. In psychological perspectives, SOC has consequently been framed as a wellness-protecting (Bernabé et al., 2009) and stress resource (Jakobsson, 2011; Lindström & Eriksson, 2005; Togari, Yamazaki, Nakayama, & Shimizu, 2007) orientation to life. SOC originates as a psychological construct from Antonovsky's salutogenic theory in which people's mental health or psychological well-being constitutes oscillation along a behavioural continuum ranging from optimal health to total ill health (Barnard, Peters, & Muller, 2010; Jakobsson, 2011; Lindström & Eriksson, 2005). Antonovsky (1979) coined the term

SOC, defining the concept broadly as a general and universal life-orientation (Gropp, Geldenhuys, & Visser, 2007; Muller & Rothmann, 2009). He proposed three conceptual SOC subcomponents (A. Antonovsky, 1987): cognitive understanding (comprehensibility), confidence in personal coping resources (manageability), and belief that life's challenges are worthy of engagement (meaningfulness; Gropp et al., 2007; Jakobsson, 2011; Togari et al., 2007). Meaningfulness – as motivational component – is often the most important component (A. Antonovsky, 1987). Previous research has shown that strong meaningfulness is often related to a strong belief system (Griffiths, 2009) or spirituality, thus affecting mental health and well-being positively (Mayer, 2011). Individuals with a strong SOC are expected to display control, resourcefulness, and perseverance in difficult situations (Barnard et al., 2010). Their well-being also seems to be influenced by a meaningful purpose in life (Mayer, 2011).

The role of SOC in maintaining health and work-related well-being has been well researched in the general population in South Africa (see Austin & Cilliers, 2011; Barnard et al., 2010; Muller & Rothmann, 2009; Oosthuizen & Van Lill, 2008), yet little quantitative or qualitative research focuses on HE women leaders' SOC (Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013). While some studies found that men display higher SOC than women (Anson, Paran, Neumann, & Chernichovsky, 1993; H. Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986), more recent research shows little to no significant evidence in this regard (Lindström & Eriksson, 2005; Van der Westhuizen, De Beer, & Bekwa, 2013). Context-specific gender-based research on SOC may enhance understanding of how it serves as a well-being resource to enable women to deal with stress that is unique to their gender-specific work–life roles.

Spirituality in the workplace

Spirituality can be defined as a subjective experience of being connected with oneself, others, and the entire universe (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Individual interest in spirituality reflects an attempt to understand the connectedness between work, relationships with others, and life beyond oneself (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997). Spirituality influences mental health and well-being in diverse social contexts (Temane & Wissing, 2006) and is a potential health resource (Larson & Larson, 2003) in work and organisational settings (Honiball et al., 2014; Mayer & Boness, 2011a). The concept is seen as moderating the relationship between stress and well-being (Y. Kim & Seidlitz, 2002) and the levels of negative life experiences, depression, and anxiety (Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). Temane and Wissing (2006), however, highlight that the relationship between psychological well-being and spirituality is modest, but differs across groups and contexts. The authors therefore emphasise that spirituality and psychological well-being need to be understood contextually as spiritual beliefs and practices varying across cultures, situations, gender, and race.

Spirituality can be attained through mindfulness as a non-judgemental experience of life (Cashwell, Paige Bentley, & Bigbee, 2007). Studies have shown that mindfulness training, as a spiritual practice, strengthens SOC in various samples of women (Christopher et al., 2011), helping women to cope with stress (Ando, Natsume, Kukihiro, Shibata, & Ito, 2011) enhancing meaningfulness (Henderson et al., 2012) and wellness (De Klerk, 2005). Recent research in South Africa highlighted an increasing need in organisations to promote meaning at work (De Klerk, 2005) and so enhance mental health and well-being (Mayer, 2011; Mayer & Boness, 2011b).

Labuschagne's (2013) model of South African workplace spirituality highlights a trend from 'having' to 'being', in which spirituality is expressed through creativity, laughter, humour, and freedom to enhance productivity and effectiveness in work–life contexts. The employee's understanding of workplace spirituality, however, remains vaguely understood and needs further exploration (Van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009). Oswick's (2009) meta-analysis of workplace spirituality

points to increased emphasis on researching its importance in the workplace. Although workplace spirituality has been defined in multiple ways, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) agree that it may contribute positively to the development and implementation of a spirituality-based organisational culture.

Although workplace spirituality is not the focus of this article, we focus on spirituality as a resource in women leaders in HE, particularly since spirituality has been emphasised as an important resource in leadership in South African organisations (Mayer & Viviers, 2014).

Purpose and objectives of research

This study's purpose was to explore how women leaders in South African HEIs construct SOC and spirituality as well-being resources in coping with daily work demands. The study aimed to contribute to empirical research on SOC and spirituality of the targeted sample, investigate SOC and spirituality from a qualitative research perspective, and provide conclusions and recommendations for future research. It contributes to the social good of women in South African HEIs to improve their leadership capacities and well-being, by generating knowledge and applying it to leadership development interventions.

Method

This qualitative study adopts an exploratory and descriptive approach. It is located in a social constructionist perspective incorporating the fundamental assumptions of co-construction of meaning through integration of the participants' experiences and the theoretical preconceptions and hermeneutic lenses of the researcher.

Participants

In all, 28 women in the Higher Education Resource Services South Africa (HERS-SA) network voluntarily participated in this study. Of these, 13, occupying middle and senior leadership positions in HE, were purposefully sampled as being information-rich regarding the research objective. The sample comprised a diverse group of women in academic and support service positions from four race groups as defined in the Employment Equity Act (Department of Labour, 1998) and included five White, three coloured, three Indian, and two African women employed in seven HEIs across South Africa.

Instrument

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The researchers diverted from the traditional inductive reasoning perspective advocated by Glaser and Strauss's classical grounded theory (GT) or what Henwood and Pigeon (2003) refer to as *theoretical agnosticism*. We instead used a more abductive reasoning approach (see Kelle, 2005), purposefully constructing interview questions and framing our analysis based on the conceptual structure of the constructs to be explored.

The interview questions were developed after an extensive literature review, including studies conducted by the researchers (e.g., Mayer, 2011; Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013). The interviews contained three questions on SOC as a universal life-orientation and five on spirituality. During the initial interview, theoretical sensitivity gave rise to the additional development and inclusion of two questions on meaningfulness as a particular component of SOC and spirituality. For example,

questions such as 'Please describe your orientation in life', 'How do you approach life in general?', 'Tell me about the aspects that make your life and work meaningful', and 'Please describe the meaning of spirituality to you' were included. These questions were extended and probed as the dialogue between the researchers and the researched naturally evolved.

Procedure

Interviews, which were transcribed verbatim and then analysed, were scheduled for 60 min and were conducted face to face, telephonically, or via skype. Two of the researchers conducted the interviews over 2 months across the seven HEIs.

Data analysis

Data were analysed from the constructivist GT approach developed by Bryant and Charmaz (2007) in which social constructionist epistemological assumptions are applied whilst incorporating classical GT methods as a flexible guide rather than a rigid set of methodological rules (Charmaz, 2011).

The first researcher (C.H.D.) analysed the first interview, commencing with line-by-line deconstructing and labelling of text, creating numerous codes. Through constant comparison between data and context, codes were integrated and delimited into meaningful categories and explained through writing of memos. Interviews were added as the analysis progressed and the GT strategies of coding and memoing continued to guide the development of meaning categories across interviews.

Constant comparison between interviews led to data saturation; after analysis of 13 interviews, no new categories emerged. The third researcher (S.S.) was involved in the subsequent comparison of categories, text, and research constructs, leading to the emergence of four primary themes. Finally, the researchers collaborated in formulating a central theoretical idea describing a psycho-spiritual perspective with meaningfulness as the central component in the life-orientation and spirituality of women leaders in HE.

Ethical considerations

All interviewees consented to participate in the study and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and could withdraw participation. Rigorous analysis was attained through the iterative GT strategy of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2011) and the intersubjective validation of the initial analysis. Rhodes University, South Africa, granted ethical approval.

Findings

During data analysis, the researchers were predisposed to seek out how narratives potentially reflected SOC and its subcomponents: manageability, comprehensibility, and meaningfulness. The centrality of meaningfulness emerged as a unique construction warranting the inclusion of a separate theme, to allow in-depth discussion of the data on meaningfulness. Data analysis further aimed to address the objective to understand how women in the study constructed spirituality in their daily work lives. Although workplace spirituality was not of concern, another unexpected theme emerged, addressing the manner in which women leaders in HEIs enact their spirituality in the workplace. The findings are thus discussed along four primary themes: life-orientation in terms of SOC, meaningfulness, spirituality, and spirituality in the workplace.

Theme 1: life-orientation in terms of SOC

The conceptual structure of SOC based on three subcomponents as theorised in the literature (A. Antonovsky, 1987) was evident in the data. The functionality of each subcomponent as reflected in the participants' responses was particularly interesting. Manageability is primarily concerned with the instrumental aspect of behaviour where one can display confidence in using personal coping mechanisms. Participants' responses depicting active behaviour to cope with life demands were evident in the descriptions of their life-orientation. Constant endeavour to achieve work–life balance emerged as an instrumental aspect of women's behaviour, as reflected on by I7¹ discussing demands on her: 'I try to make sure I've got the home life, the work life . . . on all levels, the day-to-day side, the emotional side, the work side, and then the spiritual side . . .' When asked to describe her orientation to life, I13 also referred to work–life integration, specifically that women cope because of their ability to balance multiple roles and demands:

Sometimes you find you are pulled in different ways and then you've got different demands on you and you have to negotiate those demands. You need to make space for that. Sometimes that can guide you out of sync, but I'm not saying it's not a good thing. Sometimes the one enriches the other . . . I approach it in terms of priority and I would also do it in what interests me most.

Women leaders in HE daily face unique challenges and work–life balance strategies enable not mere coping but life enrichment. The women constantly make a conscious effort to integrate their work–life roles as part of their life-orientation:

I see the connection between home and work and sport and spirituality and whether you're in menopause or not, and if I fight with my husband . . . , it's connected to how I feel today and how I'm likely to respond . . . I'm the director . . . and I'm a mother and a wife and a daughter and I'm a sister. . . . For me it was about trying to get the balance right . . . (I14)

The interviewees' life-orientations were also reflected in a particular attitude to self, others, and life in general, based on a need for life to be comprehensible: 'I can't always expect to be understood and what works better is you try to understand others' (I29). Comprehensibility reflects the cognitive component of SOC. Women's reliance on cognitive understanding of their context to enable coping is articulated in I7's account of resolving difficulties at work:

I walk around in my garden every morning and I'll think about a situation and think what can I do . . . I will try and think of how I can fix the situation . . . but if I think I've made the wrong decision it kind of eats me up. I'll mull on it forever.

Similarly I17 decided not to resign despite feeling discriminated against, based on her rational analysis of the situation:

I didn't leave it completely, I simply stepped back . . . I think it is important to . . . decide what strategy is important when. I would rather re-direct my energies and when the time is right go back to that space.

A strong motivational component emerged from women's reflections on their life-orientations, reflecting the SOC meaningfulness subcomponent. Participants frequently expressed more emotive and value-driven orientations in describing their life-orientation, for example, I15 said, 'I enjoy life, I'm enjoying my work. I find things to do that make my work exciting', and I17 stated, 'I decided it was best for me to sit out of the organisation because it was bringing me down, it was

impacting on me holistically and I wasn't able to make meaningful contributions'. I21 engages in her work because she derives meaning from it: 'When that underprivileged child coming through my classroom for the first time . . . and they finish their programmes, I can look back and say I've made a difference in that person's life'. I27 also reported pride in overcoming problems, and doing and applying research: 'It is something I am proud of . . . I find it very meaningful to do research and to use my research and to apply it'. Pride, meaning, and purpose are sources of motivation, igniting passion, meaning, and purpose. I14 reported work being 'a very stimulating part and very important part of what I do. It gives me purpose' and 'My mom would say to me oh you've been working . . . I can see because your eyes are sparkling and shiny'.

SOC was therefore evident in terms of participants' life-orientation, through the constructs of manageability (especially in the instrumentality of constantly striving for work-life balance), followed by comprehensibility (expressed through an attitude of rational understanding) and the motivational component (meaningfulness) as reflected in response to meaning, purpose, and passion.

Theme 2: meaningfulness

Women's meaningful orientation to life initiated further probing into aspects contributing to meaning for women in leadership positions. This study's data suggest that relationships contribute to women's experience of meaningfulness mainly in terms of four forms of orientation we define as other-orientation, self-orientation, trans-personal orientation (referred to by the interviewees as beyond the personal), and task-orientation. These concepts expand the literature's conceptualisation of meaningfulness as the motivational subcomponent of SOC, to reflect the key significance of a relational orientation in finding meaning in women's work lives.

For the women participants, relationships contribute to meaningfulness through being connected with others; contributing to others' well-being and increasing mutual understanding: ' . . . it's that collaboration, the contact, the engaging, the people; it's the engagements, both intellectual and emotional' (I16). This other-orientated relational aspect of meaningfulness is especially evident in one participant's experience of being a woman leader in HE:

I find meaning in the little things that happen to me every day, whether it's a student that leaves my office feeling better understood, whether it's me having read something that makes me feel that I understand the world a little bit better, or myself a little better, I find meaning in interactions, I guess. (I23)

Women participants construct meaningfulness through self-orientation in terms of academic achievement, growing as a person, feeling stimulated, self-actualisation, and passion, as aptly reflected in one women's experience of attending high-level meetings: 'I find it very stimulating to listen to their discussions. My contribution is limited at the moment but I find it a growing experience and I find it very stimulating' (I13).

Meaningfulness is furthermore connected to trans-personal experiences, as some women relate their experience of meaningfulness to a connection to God and hearing their inner calling: 'I suppose my feet are firmly grounded in the fact that I'm a Christian . . . the point of being called for me keeps me on the ground in many responsibilities' (I8). At this point the link with spirituality became increasingly evident, as reflected in I16's response to what contributes to meaningfulness for her: 'I'm sure the universe will be good to you, you know things will work out. So I . . . have some kind of sense of it not all being entirely random, of there being something'.

Task-orientation also emerged as an aspect of meaningfulness, as one woman (I27) noted that 'making things run smoothly' concerning task completion contributes to meaningfulness.

Theme 3: spirituality

In reflecting spirituality, the data yielded three categories constructed as inner-connectedness, trans-personality, and spirituality as a coping resource in the work context. Inner connection first emerged as an underlying category in constructing our understanding of women leaders' spirituality. Women relate spirituality to a personal inner connection in terms of identity and self-awareness: 'It's more about deeper understanding of who you are really . . . you have to tap into your soul' (I29). I13's words demonstrate spirituality from an inner-connectedness perspective: 'The things that happen at work . . . are all temporary . . . some things you can control and some you can't . . . so you can't determine everything and you just find that kind of peacefulness with yourself' and ' . . . I do think for me spirituality is being able to spend a little time thinking about the self and what is important to you' (I16). I23 states,

Finding motivations for things that aren't related to material outcomes . . . I think it's a place where you are your highest or most complete self. And it's not necessarily even a self that you envision for yourself . . . there's just a completeness about reaching that . . . wanting to evaluate myself as a whole human being.

In terms of trans-personal understanding, spirituality is described as being beyond religion and everyday activities, being in connection with the highest self, one's proximity to God, and being part of creation. One participant's response to how she experiences spirituality in work and life encapsulates much of this theme:

. . . spirituality for me is how you connect with in the divine and God. Irrespective of . . . religion . . . , I believe there's one Creator who is one God and I believe we are all part and parcel of that . . . but we do have an abnormal society that translates into the workplace, and I try to keep a balance with the spiritual part of it. We don't focus on the externals . . . What matters is the internal being, the spirit – that matters, and what you do, the positives that you do. (I9)

Although several women related spirituality to their religious conceptions about God, others, not ascribing to a particular religion, commented on their connection with 'a higher being'. For them, spirituality is experienced in moving beyond 'doing things' and in a belief independent of institutions and religion.

Moreover, women integrated spirituality with work as a coping resource and standard of behaviour: 'I work with constitutional law . . . for me those articulations of dignity, quality, freedom . . . have a spiritual dimension . . . those values should animate your daily interactions with people' (I23). I14 highlights 'I believe all stuff starts in the spiritual. It just manifests itself physically'. For I9, her spirituality is reflected in her everyday decisions and actions as a manager. Having denied someone leave from work she relates,

If that (spirituality) was not there it would be difficult to understand. So that keeps me going and I try to be just and fair . . . it's not always possible to give everyone what they want . . . she was going off for three years and she was not too happy with me. She walked past the passage not greeting, yet I will continue greeting. (I9)

I29 clearly links spirituality to work in reflecting on how it enables her to cope with work-related challenges: ' . . . if you are in your work space and you do not have a strong spiritual being, you cannot survive'.

Theme 4: spirituality in the workplace

Most of the women leaders' conversations about spirituality reflected their spirituality and gender identity as interconnected and mutually developed. However, exploration of their spirituality

practices in the work context revealed mostly individualised practices such as embracing quiet time (I8, I13, I15, I21, I23, I29), engaging in leisure activities (I7, I8, I16), experiencing gratitude, self-awareness, and self-reflection (I7, I16). Social practices were only reflected on outside the work context, such as joining a women's support group (I7; I21) and investing in informal relationships (I13, I16, I21) or joining church groups (I7, I21, I29). Interestingly, none of the women-related spiritual practices of a social nature in the work context. Spiritual awareness at work only seems possible through individualistic activities. Their experience of spirituality thus seemed detached from the work context although it affected the way they saw their roles and responsibilities at work. Even though most women display spiritual awareness and meaning at work, spirituality is developed mainly outside the work context. It is used in the work context as a resource to cope with trials and challenges. Individual and informal social spiritual practices take precedence, which might be related to the institutional character of HEIs and the values they promote.

Discussion

This research explored SOC and spirituality as experienced by a targeted cohort, namely women leaders in South African HEIs and found that SOC and spirituality enhance the well-being of individuals in leadership positions (Mayer, 2011) and are general coping and well-being resources in the workplace (A. Antonovsky, 1987; Honiball et al., 2014; Muller & Rothmann, 2009).

Like other studies identifying work life balance as a main coping concern of women in different contexts (Löve et al., 2011), women leaders in the present investigation displayed SOC by expressing a rational understanding of their context (linked to comprehensibility as SOC subcomponent) and consistently managing their work–life balance (linked to manageability as SOC subcomponent). Work–life balance seems to be uniquely experienced by women (e.g., Franks et al., 2006; Martin & Barnard, 2013; Watts, 2009), and although it remains challenging, our participants construe it as instrumental in upholding their sense of well-being.

Whereas others highlight mindfulness as a fundamental coping strategy for women (Ando et al., 2011; Cashwell et al., 2007; Christopher et al., 2011), in this study, meaningfulness emerged as a central theme. Participants construed meaningfulness as a key motivational component in reflecting on SOC (cf. Henderson et al., 2012), and as being mirrored in the spirituality subthemes of inner-connectedness, trans-personality, and work-based spiritual practices. The data led to the identification of four sub-concepts (other-orientation, self-orientation, trans-personal orientation, and task-orientation) to encapsulate a relational orientation in explaining meaningfulness. These emerging sub-concepts explicating meaningfulness from a relational orientation are mirrored in the sub-concepts that emerged as essential to women's construction of spirituality. Three categories of spirituality were developed from the data: trans-personality, inner-connectedness, and work-based spiritual practices. Trans-personality is mirrored in the meaningfulness sub-concept 'transpersonal orientation', constructed here. The spirituality sub-concept of inner-connectedness mirrors the self-orientation sub-concept underlying meaningfulness and task-orientation (meaningfulness sub-concept). Regarding work-based spiritual practices, the data show that women tend to develop spirituality outside the work context and in the workplace rather employ individual practices. Yet women derive meaning from work (task-orientation), which may enhance their well-being in the workplace.

Meaningfulness thus links the psychological and spiritual perspectives to well-being and coping, a sense that evolved further in reflecting on I27's view of spirituality as a universal adhesive: 'Spirituality for me is a personal belief that there is no cosmic glue . . .' (I27). From this we developed our construction of a psycho-spiritual approach to well-being, in which meaningfulness constitutes the *cosmic glue* that integrates SOC with spirituality. We agree with A. Antonovsky (1987)

that meaningfulness is the most important SOC subcomponent and central to spirituality and belief (cf. Griffiths, 2009; Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002; Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013). This idea motivated an integration of the study's three primary themes, namely, life-orientation in terms of SOC, meaningfulness, and spirituality, wherein we propose meaningfulness as a central psycho-spiritual adhesive in women leaders' well-being. Furthering our concept, we metaphorically propose that SOC and spirituality are foundational to forming a healthy life-orientation driven by meaning.

Meaningfulness in the work context is important for subjective well-being (Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013) and positive work-related outcomes such as work engagement (Swart & Rothmann, 2012; Van Zyl, Deacon, & Rothmann, 2010). Psychological meaning in the workplace is defined as the meaning of work and a job's significance for someone (Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013). Lethborg, Aranda, Bloch, and Kissane (2006) propose meaning-based coping as essential to coping. Our data extend the role of meaningfulness as the motivational component of SOC, in highlighting the relational aspect of meaningfulness in the well-being of participants.

Meaningfulness as a motivational and relational construct, embedded in a psycho-spiritual perspective, thus developed as the central theoretical idea for understanding how women leaders orientate their lives to cope with daily challenges.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how women leaders in HE construct SOC and spirituality as resources in the workplace. Bearing in mind its limitations, the study incorporates a small context-specific sample, restricting any generalisation claims, yet provides a rich emic perspective on the subject matter. Findings are presented from a specific theoretical stance incorporating SOC and spirituality as a hermeneutic framework for working with the data, leaving open the possibility of different interpretations from different perspectives.

This study provides an emerging psycho-spiritual perspective to well-being highlighting the centrality of meaningfulness as a motivational and relational construct. Well-being interventions should promote the value of workplace spirituality by enabling women to develop meaningful self, other, task, and trans-personal relations in the work setting, which would enhance women leaders' resourcefulness and ability to address stressful HE challenges, enriching their leadership capacity to the benefit of others. This would contribute to the discourse on 'what comprises strong leadership characteristics and practice in HE' for women leaders who currently lack critical mass in senior occupational levels.

Sensitising women to meaningfulness in their work and personal lives will similarly enhance both their SOC and spirituality. In terms of future research, this SOC – meaningfulness – spirituality relationship and its direction may benefit from further exploration. More gender-based research is also needed to establish whether the relational and motivational components of meaningfulness resemble the experiences of women leaders based outside the HE sector.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Any opinion, finding, and conclusion or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the authors; the NRF accepts no liability in this regard. The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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Note

1. Participants were given numbers in order to distinguish their identities without compromising anonymity. I7 means, for example, interviewee number 7.

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