

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS: Interpretation of Life Events among Women Practitioners of Alternative Spirituality in Slovakia¹

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on some issues concerning alternative spirituality in Slovakia. The authors analysed the data obtained from an anthropological research focusing on the reasons behind the relative popularity of alternative spirituality in the said country. Using the qualitative methodology (in-depth interviews and participant observations) and working with mostly women, the authors studied how the study participants got involved in alternative spirituality, how they see their participation, what they were use it for, and what they experience when they attend the sessions (e.g. how they feel, why and when they experience positive/negative feelings, how they perceive the 'alternative community'). The results of the analysis suggest that involvement in alternative spirituality 'encourages' an interpretation drift (Luhrman, 1989) with regard to one's experiences and their sacralisation, giving these a deeper meaning.

KEYWORDS: alternative spirituality, interpretation, spiritual explanations, coping strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The change in religiosity mainly in the Western part of the world has been broadly observed and analysed during the last decade(s) both by social scientists and traditional church representatives (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Heelas 2008; Tacey 2004). The effect of this change has been so remarkable that the term 'spiritual revolution' has been used to refer to such phenomenon. The reasons for it and its consequences have also been widely cited and discussed (Woodhead et al. 2002; Fuller 2001). In general, 'spiritual revolution' points to the increasing number of people engaged in alternative spirituality, a form of religiosity usually connected to 'de-traditionalisation and de-institutionalisation' (Versteeg 2011). The term 'spirituality' was used in the 17th and 18th centuries as a term describing an 'affective relationship with God' sometimes characterised by extensive emotionality (Oman 2013, 27). In the second half of the 20th century it also started to be used to refer to religiosity outside the formal tradition (Oman 2013, 28), as practised in new religious movements but also by neopagan and New Age groups (York 2000).

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Many authors have been speaking about a spiritual change or turn manifested in the 'increasing number of people [who] now prefer to call themselves "spiritual" rather than "religious"' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 1). 'Spiritual but not religious' is how people who see themselves as believers but who strictly do not believe in God and are not members of traditional churches describe themselves. Fuller (2001) pointed out that 'unchurched' people are sometimes treated as a unified group, but they may actually differ from one another; some of them may have ambivalent relationship with the traditional church (what does not say much about their religiosity, they may be as religious as or even more religious than people who attend church regularly) and some others may not belong to any traditional church but consider spirituality important in their lives (Fuller 2001, 4). The latter see life as a 'spiritual journey' (Fuller, 2001, 4) and see any life event as a challenge that pushes them to move on and develop a new life perspective. As Fuller further claims, they see their beliefs as authentic (but they see organised religion as a threat to this authenticity), they are private (they do not want to share their spirituality with others), and they consider their stressful experiences just personal experiences rather than relating them to dogma, moral precepts, and habits (Fuller, 2001, 5). Despite these characteristics of 'alternative spirituality', we argue that there is still a need for community and shared experience, although not necessarily shared beliefs. The community plays a role in the interpretations of both common and unique life experiences during alternative-spirituality sessions.

From the perspective of social sciences, it is possible to focus not only on the sociocultural and even political or economic dimension of alternative spirituality but also on its individual and collective dimensions (e.g. Pargament et al. 1998; Pargament, Koenig and Perez 2000; Fuller 2001; Krok 2008). These last mentioned dimensions are the main topic of this paper.

The current study is a partial output of the research focused mostly on women's spirituality in the Slovak urban environments. We have been interested in the reasons for one's involvement in alternative spirituality, one's perception of it, one's motivations for embracing it, and one's goals in practising it. We analysed some of the possible reasons for the growing 'popularity' of alternative spirituality in Slovakia. The main research question was 'How did the informants cope with their life situations, and if alternative spirituality helped them cope with these, how did it do so?' From this we moved to more specific research questions: 'How are the study participants' 'alternative engagements' shaped, and what role does the community play in this?' 'Is alternative spirituality present in their everyday life, and if so, how (e.g. through interpretation of life events, etc.)? Here, we focus on how 'alternative interpretations' are formed and what the recurrent patterns in them are, and how, from a symbolic perspective, the study participants see their experiences. We argue that engaging in alternative spirituality leads to (and/or maintains) 'interpretation drift' (Luhrman 1989), but this drift manifests not only in the change of one's interpretations of life events but also in 'mastering' a *spiritual scenario* that is applicable afterwards in different contexts. These interpretations are deeply embodied and are based on the idea of external or internal pollution.

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY AND SEARCH FOR MEANING

Alternative spirituality, sometimes also called 'countercultural spirituality', is usually defined as being in opposition to traditional religiosity and to rigid dogma and social control (Bloch 1998, 56). While traditional religion is tied to 'a higher power' (God) and instructs the adherents to live every part of their life in accordance with religious rules, alternative spirituality stresses freedom, *living a fulfilling life*, and finding one's 'true self' (without precisely stating what this is) and living in accordance with it.

Heelas and Woodhead (2005) pointed out an interesting phenomenon: that while we are witnessing a growing interest in alternative spirituality (mostly in Western countries), scholars are at the same time talking about the growing *secularisation* or how the interest in

what is sacred is in permanent decline in the modern world partly due to people's education and higher standard of living (Bruce 2002; Luckman 1990, in Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 9). According to these authors, secularisation goes hand in hand with *sacralisation*: while the members of the traditional churches are decreasing in number, the interest in 'subjective forms of spirituality' is increasing. Therefore, they suggest that these two processes (secularisation and sacralisation) coexist and should thus be studied together (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 10). While they claim that the traditional form of religiosity is largely 'a life lived according to external expectations',² they likewise claim that spirituality is *subjective*, involving 'a life lived according to one's own inner experience'³: They claim that spirituality involves turning one's back on a life 'lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man, etc.' and living 'in deep connection with the unique experience of self-in-relation' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 10).

It therefore seems that people who are interested in alternative spirituality are also interested in 'making their lives better', searching for meaning (in their life in a broader context, but quite often in the individual life situations they come to face), coping with life's challenges, etc. Living a meaningful life can be an ultimate goal, more important than achieving power or pleasure (Park 2013, 357). In this respect, humans are specific (see Shettleworth 2010): we want life partners who will support us in fulfilling our dreams; we see parenting as a highly deliberate process; we invest time, emotions, and different kinds of resources in our children so they can have a meaningful life; and we want jobs that will not only bring us financial safety but will also give us deeper satisfaction.⁴ We can be deeply disappointed if our lives turn out to be different from what we have imagined it to be. Even though there are activities and relationships that can help us come closer to our goals, for many people the ultimate meaning can be achieved only through religious or spiritual activities (Vail et al. 2010; Park 2013) due to the "deeper" perspective that these activities can provide in connection to one's experiences. Psychologists call this kind of meaning a *global meaning*, 'an overarching system that provides the general framework through which people structure their lives and assign meanings to specific encounters with their environment (*situational meaning*)' (Park 2010, 2013, 358). Not only do we want our lives in general to have a meaning; we are permanently *searching for meaning* in the events and situations that we experience or encounter (see also Baumeister 1991, in Park 2013). The more salient or unexpected the event is, the more we want to find out why it happened. Individuals' interpretations of life events are usually tied to their global meaning; that is, individuals' global meaning structures and frames their understanding of life events and may give them hope (but may also bring them more stress under some circumstances) and may help them cope with life's challenges (for more, see Park and Folkman 1997; Park 2010, 2013).

Alternative spirituality is still marginal in countries like Slovakia due to the dominance of traditional churches, mainly Catholic, but there is evidence of its growing popularity mostly in urban environments. This notwithstanding, there are no clear statistics yet on this population in Slovakia, only partial research (e.g. Bužeková 2012, 2019, 2020; Jerotijević and Hagovská 2019; Willard and Cingl 2017). What makes 'counting the numbers' in this context problematic is that alternative spirituality is a broad concept covering different kind of activities and groups (e.g. yoga groups, women circles, New Age groups, neopagan groups, wicca practitioners and practitioners of other forms of magic). It is problematic to make assumptions about Slovakia in this regard on the basis of the statistics in other European countries, except the general assumption that there is a growing number of people involved in alternative spirituality. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) pointed out an important fact: spirituality (the number of people involved in alternative spirituality) is growing worldwide while traditional churches face

² Ruled by authorities and obligations, and strongly moralized

³ Focused on one's bodily experiences, dreams, emotions and sentiments

⁴ All these issues are culturally determined and differ according to the sociocultural context.

a decline of believers. However, church ‘renegades’ do not automatically become spiritual devotees. Even though ‘growing spirituality’ means that more people are becoming interested in spirituality, we do not know much about what their involvement in alternative spirituality really means, if they are actively participating in spiritual activities or if their interest is longitudinal (and is reflected in their embrace of ‘life philosophies’). Spiritual groups are fluid; the same people can attend different sessions and treatments. As such, the real numbers of those involved in such groups and their activities are disputable (see also Luhrman 1989).

Although Slovakia shares a common history with the Czech Republic, it is problematic to compare these two countries in terms of religiosity. When it comes to religiosity, Slovakia is closer to Poland or some other post-socialist countries; the Czech Republic is actually an outlier in the sphere of religion (Willard and Cingl 2017). Most post-socialist countries experienced a general increase in religiosity after the fall of the communist regime, manifested mainly (but not only) in the revival of traditional churches (see Polack 2001, 2003), but this is only partially true for the Czech Republic (Hamplova and Nešpor 2009; Minarik 2014, in Willard and Cingl 2017). For the Czechs, religion is not an important marker of their identity, and they have mostly refused to discuss it in their censuses since after 1989 (Hamplová 2013, in Majo and Káčerová 2019). The censuses from 2011 showed that 76% of the Slovaks declared themselves as religious while only 20.8% of the Czechs did. It is interesting that the same census in the Czech Republic (the 2011 census) showed that 34.5% of the Czechs had no religious affiliation, marking a decrease from 2001, when 59% declared the same (Majo and Káčerová 2019). In contrast, according to Pew Research Centre, 64% of the Slovaks see religion as a key component of their national identity.⁵ According to the same survey, Europeans are in general less religious than the rest of the world, but there are differences between Western and Eastern Europe: while traditional religiosity is in decline in Western Europe, the affiliation with traditional churches is quite stable in Eastern Europe, with a few exceptions. When it comes to general religiosity, similar results were shown by the European Values Study for 2017 (Strapcová and Zeman 2019), where 70.8% of the participants stated that they had a church affiliation, with almost 80% being Catholics (see also Tížik and Zeman 2017). Eastern Europeans are also more prone to express belief in God and to hold some esoteric or folk religious beliefs, such as the evil eye.⁶

Voas, looking at the situation in Europe, claimed that the population of every country in the continent has a different profile of religiosity, but nearly all have a subpopulation that claims to be ‘neither religious nor unreligious’ (Voas 2009, 155).

Alternative spirituality can be tied to specific personalities or to people experiencing specific life situations (e.g. illness, loss). However, involvement in alternative spirituality can reflect a specific life philosophy. Not only in the context of spirituality and religion but also in the context of ‘nonreligion’, Taves, Aspren and Ihm (2018, 3) proposed to speak about worldviews, which they define as ‘a complex set of representations related to “big questions” (BQs), such as (1) ontology (what exists, what is real), (2) epistemology (how we come to know what is true), (3) axiology (what the good that we should strive for is), (4) praxeology (what actions we should take), and (5) cosmology (where we come from and where we are going), which define and govern a way of life’.⁷

⁵ <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>.

⁶ For more results, see <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

⁷ According to the authors, BQs are not human-specific; other species deal with them in one way or another. What are specific for humans are that we are making narratives (culturally influenced) about humans and we are connecting these narratives with other narratives or are looking for links among them, and are even creating links between different domains.

This approach allows avoiding religion/spirituality/nonreligion categories and focusing instead on people as members of different groups and/or 'representants' of different cultural models. Taves (2018) further argues that the study of worldviews can be related to the study of *meanings*, both the global meaning reflected in our beliefs, attitudes and goals and the situationist meaning reflected in our interpretations of everyday life events.⁸

According to Paloutzian (2005), people usually turn towards spirituality when they are confronted with vicissitudes in their lives. When we experience situations that we cannot understand and that disrupt our everyday reality, when we are confronted with unexpected events (mostly negative) or when we feel threatened (even without knowing by whom), we can either re-evaluate our previous attitudes and the results of our previous search for meaning or look for a new meaning. From this perspective, spiritual transformation is a consequence of doubt, even one that is implicit or has never been verbally expressed or shared with others (Altermayer 1988, in Paloutzian 2005, 336), which leads to uncertainty and disequilibrium. This disequilibrium needs to be removed most of the time as it can be hardly accepted for a longer period. Any organism aims to restore equilibrium as soon as possible. Although Paloutzian speaks about *spiritual transformation* in the context of conversion (i.e. turning from one religious system to another), we believe that it is possible to use this term even in cases when it is problematic to speak about conversion (or a turn). Even though embracing alternative spirituality usually means leaving one's 'traditional' religiosity behind, this 'turn' does not have to be elaborated, stated or explicitly manifested. Most of the participants in our study 'got involved' in alternative spirituality spontaneously and gradually, with periods of stronger or less strong engagements. As we did not follow them 'before' and 'after' they embraced alternative spirituality, it was difficult for us to 'trace the change' that happened, but we believe that this change can be gleaned in their narratives.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

Our sample consisted of 15 women who attended alternative-spirituality sessions involving mostly women. Some of them also participated in mixed spiritual groups, but such groups were not included in the analysis in this study. The women in our sample were 25–57 years old at the time of the study. They were not part of the same groups, but as the fluctuation in alternative-spirituality sessions is quite high (and typical), some of them could have attended different gatherings and participated in different events. They had been involved in alternative-spirituality activities from a few months to a few years (eight or more years).

⁸ Taves (2018) also pointed out another important issue: When speaking about meaning(s), psychologists usually stress that there are implicit and explicit meanings. We (humans) are usually trying to understand events that are outstanding, often those that are traumatic or extraordinary, and to find the deeper sense of such events (why they happened and what they can teach us). We, however, are much more exposed to ordinary, unremarkable events that we do not explicitly reflect on. According to Taves, it may be that any action we perform on a daily basis is implicitly processed as goal directed and is therefore meaningful (e.g. I am hungry; therefore, I prepare food – *example, DJ*); as such, we do not spend time reflecting on it and explicitly looking for its meaning. If/when we have lost our sense of meaning, however, because our life is disrupted by some unexpected event, we feel uncertain and try to restore our equilibrium by explicitly looking for meaning. An explicit search for meaning does not mean that we are aware of why we are doing it; this process is also implicit and triggered by a feeling of uncertainty (*comment – DJ*).

Some of the informants were leaders of spiritual groups. For them, this was both a way of life and a way of earning a living. Others were regular participants who embraced alternative spirituality for personal reasons. We can say that most of the informants were from the upper middle class, which is not surprising considering that alternative-spirituality activities are not free of charge. As for the gender pattern, it is in accordance with the general trend (see Bužeková 2012, Keshet and Simchai 2014, etc.): there have been spiritual women groups since the feminist spirituality movements in the 1970s (Longman 2017).

The groups we speak about here are usually called 'women circles'. For ethical reasons and to maintain the anonymity of the informants, we do not present herein concrete information about them other than that most of them live in the capital of Slovakia and in the newly developing suburban area around it, but gatherings can be organised anywhere in Slovakia and can take place regularly (e.g. each week) or irregularly. We also changed informants name for the purpose of the study. The practitioners of alternative spirituality usually meet in summer and during the winter solstice or in spring and during the fall equinox, or when a practitioner requests a meeting owing to a special occasion, such as when preparing for a delivery or after a delivery, to welcome a new mother. Women circles do not explicitly embrace a philosophy, but one of the books that many of them read or discuss is Clarissa Pincola Estés's *Women Who Run with the Wolf*.

The second author also attended a weekend workshop in the central part of Slovakia during the study. Most of the women in the workshop combined different alternative-spirituality methods, collective or individual (e.g. family constellation, traditional Chinese medicine, craniosacral therapy, homeopathy). Most of them had an ambivalent opinion towards biomedicine; they did not completely refuse biomedical treatments but combined alternative medicine and biomedicine to resolve most of their health issues. Some of them used individual psychotherapy when necessary.

Most of the informants had higher education (college or university degree) and had different educational backgrounds and professions (e.g. artists, a former bank clerk, a judge, a foreign language teacher).

When it comes to religion, most of the study participants can be described as 'spiritual'. Some were raised in traditional religiosity (i.e. most were Catholic) but did not see themselves as religious in the traditional sense. Magical thinking⁹ was broadly present in their statements and views. They mostly saw the events in their lives as being connected with one another and as having a deeper meaning.

Both authors used the same study methods (to be further described later) but did not communicate with the same informants (although due to the already-mentioned fluctuation of participation in the alternative-spirituality sessions, the informants could have met or could even know one another). The study methods that were used included in-depth interviews, informal discussions and observations of gatherings. The topics of the interviews were quite broad and covered personal information, family background, attitudes towards religion (religiosity) and alternative medicine, reasons for participation in the women circles, and perceptions of these. We first asked the informants to tell us something about themselves that they found important, and then conducted a semi-structured interview with them. We asked them to describe how they started to be involved in alternative-spirituality groups, how they found out about these, what major life events they had faced and what kinds of solutions they had applied to these, how they see and interpret such situations, and who had helped them cope with these. We also asked them about the kinds and forms of alternative therapy they use

⁹ Magical thinking and behaviour are based on a (primarily implicit) belief that there is a causal relation that links the events that the person experiences, although there is no empirical evidence of such (Jerotijević 2013).

in general, and what their attitude towards these is as well their attitude towards alternative medicine because according to some classifications (Barnes, Bloom and Nahin 2008) alternative spirituality may be a form of alternative medical practice. We were interested in how the informants represent the efficacy of the alternative methods they had used: how they decided that these had helped them, when/why they decided to stop using a given method, and how their family members and close friends see their spirituality. The informants described their feelings during the alternative-spirituality sessions, their connections with the other women in the group, and when/why they felt comfort or discomfort during the sessions.

Conducting observations at alternative-spirituality gatherings has limitations. Very often, such gatherings involve closed groups, and not all the women accept an outsider's presence or agree to be observed in highly personal situations. Sometimes, an outsider's presence is seen as influencing the flow and intensity of the session (see also Luhrman 1989). Therefore, data about them were collected indirectly through informants' descriptions, with some occasions when these can be directly followed up. These groups are dynamic, with some being more stable at least during a concrete period. They can be regular (e.g. the same group of women meet every week for a certain period of time) or irregular (e.g. they do not meet with the same people every week or meet mostly in weekend workshops somewhere outside the city/town). Observations helped us gain a clearer idea of how these groups function and what happens while someone is talking about her problems, see the others' reactions and emotions while one is speaking and come to know everything that had not been verbalised by the study participants in our interviews with them. The main topic was organised around archetypes: maiden, mother, lover, wild woman and wise woman. The women usually sit in a circle around an 'altar' with different kinds of objects thereon (e.g. cards with pictures of goddesses, figures of angles). One of the main parts of these spiritual gatherings is the 'sharing' part. Here, the women "share" their stories and experiences (e.g. actual or past acute or chronic problems) and speak about the things that worry them. Other women then give comments on what was said or shared by another, or make connections between these and their own life situations and experiences. The gatherings are very emotional, full of both positive and negative emotions. Afterwards, there are collective 'exercises' with a practical goal, such as 'freeing' one's emotions. The last part is a ritual during which the women meditate, dance and make ritualised movements.

The obtained data were transcribed by the authors (some data were already in written form) and then coded and analysed. The data were coded in cycles: both authors started with open coding (also using in-vivo coding) and then moved to axial and selective coding but combined it with emotional coding (Saldaña 2009), through which explicit or implicit (manifestations) of emotions were identified, and thematic coding focused on recurrent motives in narratives. Due to the characteristics of the data (as described above), we extensively collected ethnographic data covering different perspectives, not only of the study participants' engagement in alternative spirituality but also of their 'perceptions of life' and attitudes towards different life situations and relationships. As such, the data were analysed recurrently and from different perspectives. As we were interested in how the study participants coped with challenging life situations, we first identified the situations mentioned by the study participants and then looked for the solutions to these. If a solution was connected to spiritual engagement, we looked for an interpretation of it from an emic perspective and marked its steps. We went through the data repeatedly, looking for the connections between life situations and the causalities among them that the study participants mentioned. We were interested to see how they 'built their narrative' and what kinds of explanations they provided, how this was connected to their engagement in alternative-spirituality groups, and how this engagement might have shaped their experiences. When it comes to emotions, these could be explicitly stated by the study participant (e.g. *I was sad, I felt excited*) or implicitly presented in their statements. On some occasions, the authors observed expressions of emotions (e.g. laughing or crying).

THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY IN THE INTERPRETATIONS OF EVENTS

As mentioned earlier, alternative spirituality is a relatively new phenomenon in Slovakia. It is problematic to speak of alternative spirituality as a 'spiritual revolution' in the context of Slovakia as the Christian churches are still influential in the country. In addition, there are no statistics yet about the alternative-spirituality groups in the country. However, it seems that at least to some extent, Slovakia is following the trend in other parts of Europe. Studies from Slovakia (Bužeková 2019, 2020; Willard and Cingl 2017; Jerotijević and Hagoovská 2019) show that there is a rising interest in alternative spirituality in the country, mostly in the urban environments.

The studied alternative-spirituality groups were described by most of the informants as groups with which they meet to talk about their problems and to dance or spend some quality time with other women. The women who attend the sessions have no common knowledge or shared philosophy; they have some implicit shared views, but these are usually not explicitly discussed during the meetings. From their own perspective, the women attend the sessions to talk about and teach themselves the 'essence of femininity' or 'what it means to be a woman' and to develop their own femininity, but also to talk about their relationships, kids, life issues and challenges, physical and mental health, etc. Although the latter topics are only part of what is discussed in such sessions, they are the most important topics discussed therein. In addition, while the women usually sit in a circle and talk during the sessions, but they also dance, perform 'ritualistic' activities, put small 'material offerings' on a common altar, etc.

There is a shared narrative about the origin of these groups: that groups like these have 'always' existed, that they were part of our (human) past. It is also said that way back when, women were considered equal to one another and helped and supported one another. Somewhere along the way, however, something changed; women became competitive, and their relationships changed. Compared to the past, the women today no longer have any space for themselves. As the informant Marcela said, *'It is important to build a place where women do not have to fight, where it is not necessary for them to fight. We were raised to fight, to see other woman as our rivals ...'*

It is interesting that even though feminism is an ideology that is usually connected with such groups, there were gender stereotypes and dissonances presented in the women's narratives (e.g. a woman should be sensitive, gentle, and receptive; does not fight; should enjoy spending time with other women). At the same time women are viewed as unstable, guided by their cycles (hormones) and emotional. On the other hand, men are seen as systematic and analytical, stable, needing freedom, 'hunters', competitive and longing for recognition.

As mentioned earlier, some of the study participants' reasons for engaging in alternative spirituality may vary, but one of the reasons can be a life change or a challenging life situation. As we said in another study (Jerotijević and Hagoovská 2019), alternative spirituality may help one get over negative or stressful life experiences or problems.

One such problem is the problem of reproduction (i.e. infertility or inability to conceive), which cropped up repeatedly in relation to alternative therapies. The following example shows how one study participant got hooked not only on alternative spirituality but also on alternative methods in general while trying to address a health issue. Milada could not get pregnant, and when the conventional therapies failed to solve her problem, she decided to try alternative therapies.

I took various vitamins and herbs. I calculated my fertile days. I changed my diet. I did yoga. I tried Chinese medicine, acupuncture, and then a therapy whose name I can't say exactly but just involved a man massaging my feet because there were nerve endings there from all over my

body and by massaging those points he could stimulate proper energy flow in the body. And here I am at constellations ... So the doctors ruled out certain disorders on my side or my husband's. They said we both didn't have any illness that would prevent us from conceiving a child. Our gynaecological examination also didn't turn up anything, so I started Googling about our case. I found so many materials to choose from, so I read some forums and recommendations and used them to choose my next steps.

Infertility can be hard for partners to cope with for various reasons (e.g. psychological, feelings of pressure, the length of the process of overcoming it). If one undergoes treatment, there is no guarantee that one will manage to get pregnant or if so, when it will happen. The uncertainty of success or repeated failures, as mentioned above, may lead to both partners or one of them deciding to seek a solution outside biomedicine as in the case of Milada who said: *'[I have] maybe zero [expectations]. I've tried so many things and have forbidden myself from getting excited about any of them. I was always full of expectations when I tried something new, and then I got disappointed afterwards'*. However, she added, *'As I said before, I've read that it can also help with fertility, and I will try everything in the world until I get lucky'* (laughter).

As Benyamini (2003) pointed out, infertility is special because it does not have a partial solution; it is an "either-or" state. Unlike other health problems (e.g. where an individual can maintain his or her good health only by continuing to take medicines regularly for some time), pregnancy can either happen or not happen. Women often say that they looked for help because they wanted to know the cause of their infertility (Becker and Nachtigall 1994). This is also uttered by patients with various diseases (Benyamini, Leventhal and Leventhal 1997). Keinan and Sivan (2001) argued that stress (related to health condition) motivates the search for a causal factor: it is an attempt to regain control by attributing some meaning to the situation. In the case of infertility, it is not always possible to give a clear answer as to why pregnancy did not happen. The treatment process can also be mentally demanding, and as the number of attempts increases, so too does the anxiety (Benyamini 2003, 149). Situations like this lead to uncertainty and may support a tendency to try to understand why something happened.

After the gatherings of the women circles, we were able to talk with some of the women about their reflections of the gatherings. They discussed similar problems and situations. As in the case mentioned earlier, when someone experiences a physical problem that is difficult to understand even from a biomedical perspective, trying to understand why the problem exists may be helpful. This 'understanding', however, is highly personal and may be symbolic; it may not make sense to someone else.

Alternative therapies can give one a feeling of actively tackling a problem (in contrast, biomedical treatments put the patient in a passive position because the patient cannot affect the choice of therapy). Communicating with the other persons present, presenting one's own problem in the form of a narrative (creating causal chains for various events in the past) and clarifying the causes of the problem (whether an internal or external factor) can help one come to terms with a health problem at least to some extent. As Viera said, *'It's something you experience in your own body and not something that you learn about by listening to psychologists, for example. You see your situation as if it were set out on a plate before you, as in a theatre or a film, and it's easier to see what's bad when it's thought of for a moment as being about someone else.'*

Another informant, Marína, has a child who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Marína had different family issues, both in her family of origin (e.g. broken relationship with

one's parents) and in her family by affinity (e.g. manipulative partner). She felt insecure, unhappy and imbalanced:

I felt lost. I did not know if I should do this or that. I expected impulses from the outside that would move me forward or offer me a solution. But then ... I realised I'm the one who must take a step forward, from my own initiative, and that I must take responsibility. It's a very unpleasant decision, a decision that will chop things up or will end my relationships, ... but I believe this will help 'clear my head' because afterwards, I'll feel a sense of responsibility, and I'll feel confident. It's not that I've overcome [the problem]; but I've come to face it.

For Marína and the other women from our sample, alternative-spirituality groups helped them understand certain life events. Lack of understanding in this context means that the person seeks a 'deeper' understanding of a life event; he or she wants to know not only *how* something happened but also *why* it happened. The answers to these questions need to be personalised: one wants to know why something is happening to him or her specifically and does not want to be given general explanations (Boyer 2001). Due to *negative bias*, it is understandable that we humans mostly have a need to understand the negative things that are happening to us. We also pay more attention to things/situations that we recognise as threats. Negative bias refers to the tendency to give more attention to negative events than to positive events, to remember and recall them better, and to be more motivated to carry out an action after a negative experience (Fessler, Pisor and Navarrette 2014). It is not surprising that even though the study participants stressed the positive side of spiritual gatherings, the reason that they started to participate in them (i.e. the 'trigger') was a negative life event, either acute or chronic. In addition, not only are we humans more biased towards negative information in the sense mentioned earlier; we also have a need to understand them (i.e. we do not ask why a good thing happened to us, believing that we deserve it, but we ask why a bad thing happened to us). Many people believe that 'bad' things or negative situations do not happen without a reason, and that the more outstanding a situation is, the more we need to understand it. As was stated earlier, we are permanently searching for meaning; we need to understand what happened to us, but we also have a need for a *global meaning*, what everything that has happened to us means from a broader perspective. This may be significantly noticeable in the case of negative life events (negative from an emic perspective), dissatisfaction with oneself, the inability to accept oneself, etc. As informant Zuzana (34 y) said:

I was depressed. We had family problems. In general, I wanted to know what the goal of my life is ... or my mission.

I was not satisfied with my relationships, with myself, with my job, and even with how I looked. I was unhappy, I did not have free time; I felt sick and weak and was simply miserable. I wasn't able to say 'I want to leave this job, I want to leave this relationship, I want to do something on my own ...', so it was about self-determination, how to go out of this vicious circle, my bad relationships with my mother, with my grandmother, with my partner ...

Even though it would be problematic to speak about 'conversion', there was a 'narrative shift' or an interpretation drift (Luhrman 1989, 312) in most of the interviews with the study participants. Luhrman defines *interpretation drift* in the context of the modern magicians whom she studied: a change in one's interpretations of certain events that occurs when one gets involved in magical beliefs and practises. It is a significant shift in the interpretations of events; for instance, an atheist developing faith in God is such a shift, but falling in love is not (Luhrman 1989, 312). This is a gradual and slow process. In the case of magicians, Luhrman suggests that they started to see a reason for something that happened when they used to see it as happening by chance; they 'learned' to see that magic worked, and they saw a connection between unrelated events, etc. It can be said that what starts as an interpretation of a single event becomes a more or less coherent worldview spanning the different domains of life and

is manifested in the perception of life as such. Even though the study participants had no common and consistent set of representations and the study methods that we used did not allow us to say *when* the change occurred (or *if* it is tied to some of the study participants' personality traits), the data suggest that *drift* as described by Luhrman may appear. The reason that the study participants got involved in alternative spirituality was mostly their drive to understand why things happened in the way that they did, but at the same time they came to better understand themselves, as happened in the case of Lubica (30 y) *'I think I feel better in general. I'm no longer shouted at so much. I no longer want to hide all the time. I now believe in myself more. I don't know if I can tell it like this, but I've been feeling differently from before.'*

Anna (57), on the other hand, said, *'When I was working on my relationship with my father, it influenced my other relationships with men, with my husband, son, colleague, neighbour, and others. And I realised that I didn't have to go and talk with my neighbour and tell him 'Do not do this. You are such and such', but when I processed my relationships with my father, my neighbour also started to behave nicely. I 'processed' that (emotion) during the session, and everything got better.'*

We do not claim that all those who are searching for meaning will engage in alternative spirituality. For many, this would not be an option to even consider. Some of the informants also availed of individual alternative treatments and/or individual psychotherapy. However, they had specific expectations for all of these. From the outside it may seem that those involved in alternative spirituality are not critical of it and accept it as a whole, but this does not seem to be the case according to the data we obtained. The study participants evaluated the different methods that they used, and they sometimes decided that a particular method was not working for them. However, it happened quite often that even if they had doubts about sharing in the women circles (e.g. because it was strange for them to share their problems with other people), their positive experience from such sharing dominated, and they generally evaluated spiritual gathering as a positive (even life-changing) experience. Their doubts may have also been reduced due to the 'group support' they had obtained (e.g. a specific interpretation could be dominant in the group). Usually, if there were doubts, these did not lead to the complete refusal to use alternative methods but rather to situationist explanations of why something did not work. While we better recall negative events, at the same time our memory is selective, and paradoxically, in such cases, the informants recalled those situations where they had progress in finding a solution than those where they did not. Luhrman suggests that in such situations, people tend to generalise on the basis of 'a small number of examples, ignoring statistical information ...' (Luhrman 1989, 125).

The fact that the informants shared their experiences with other women was noticeable in their interpretations of events. Involvement in alternative spirituality may influence interpretations not only of common experiences during the gatherings but also of life situations. This usually happens step by step, progressively and implicitly, without one being necessarily aware that such 'drift' appeared. For example, when talking about the effect of spiritual gatherings, the informants discussed how they felt after attending one such gathering, and came to the conclusion that the nausea and stomach issues that some of them experienced were not a coincidence but a sign of 'decontamination' or purification of both their mind and body. As one of the informants, Helena, said, *'Those negative things, **they have to be washed away**, but that means that you opened the Pandora's box and something has to go outside. But it's a relief for the soul. We feel joy when we come to understand what happened to us, when we survive a similar situation, when we cry it out, when we fight with it, or even when we throw up to let it out, or whatever, because our body needs to be cleaned. Afterwards, happiness always comes because the soul dances.'*

The idea of contamination was quite common in the narratives. Through spiritual healing, one could restore one's lost equilibrium. Negative life situations and events can cause an imbalance that leads to loss of meaning; things are not as they used to be, and a person

wants to understand why it is such and what can be done about it. From this perspective, contamination may be a consequence, but it may also be the reason for the imbalance. That is, due to one's negative experiences one can be influenced (contaminated) by others' negative attitudes, beliefs, etc., or a negative experience may be caused by an unclean substance/energy/ thought that a person has come in touch with. As one study participant said, *'Last time, when we ended I came home feeling sick. Until now I ask myself if it was caused by a virus or by food poisoning, or if it was a very strong purification, that everything left at once or was washed away, that my body needed to be cleaned from everything it went through in the past because I opened myself. But it's a positive feeling because I saw how strong our body is, how it regenerates, what we can achieve or how we can face and fight the challenges that come our way'* (Viera, 30 y.).

The informants used similar expressions and descriptions; for instance, nausea was interpreted as a sign of cleaning, of the fact that negative experiences should be washed away, etc. Further research and another method will be needed to evaluate which 'scenarios' or parts of the narratives are better recalled and/or transmitted. However, even in our obtained data we can see certain patterns in the explanations/interpretations. The idea that when one has a problem one's body and mind were contaminated and must be cleaned is not surprising. In alternative spirituality, the body and the mind are seen as two separate but closely related factors, and the pollution of one is seen to be capable of causing the pollution of another (e.g. health issues may be interpreted as a consequence of one's or another's negative thoughts, the body can re-establish balance only when it is cleaned and when these negative influences are removed therefrom. In a community, sharing narratives and interpretations can be important (but also in the case of other non-religious beliefs). The idea that problems can be washed away is a 'catchy' one (see also Zhong and Liljenquist 2006). What is polluted is not only unclean but is also unhealthy or even immoral, as explained by Mary Douglas (1966). We often use metaphors referring to cleaning in daily life, such as *potrebujem si prečistiť hlavu* ('I need to clean my head,' which means that one wants to get rid of obsessive or messy thoughts). Metaphors like this help us not only comprehend a situation but also deal with it, even only on a symbolic level. When something is polluted, it needs to be cleaned. Lakoff and Johnson argue that our cognition is embodied (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Beck 2012). That is, *'[e]ven our most abstract and philosophical speculations are very often grounded in our motor and sensory experiences'* (Beck 2012, 40). This is quite well documented in religion or religious rituals: that being 'unclean' may be a consequence of being in touch with something that from the point of view of religious tradition is dirty or immoral, and this 'uncleanness' may not be observed as it is *in the mind*. Getting rid of (symbolic) dirt, however, usually means going through a ritualised process of cleaning that is not only symbolic but also includes actual cleaning (e.g. washing in a special well, sprinkling oneself with holy water). We use metaphors to describe our experiences, but such metaphors are based on our bodily experiences. Even if they did not do it before, people can, post hoc, 'sacralise' their experiences and find a deeper sense in them (Martos, Kézdy and Horváth-Szábo 2011, in Park 2013, 363). Although there is no connection to a doctrine, as in the case of traditional religion (e.g. that something happened because it is God's will), life events may be interpreted as having a deeper, spiritual dimension. As Anna (57 y.) said:

I know that our fate is in our hands. If an astrologist says that I will meet an accident, it can mean that I will die but also that I will only cut myself with a knife. And those are two different things. What will happen depends on me. So, it is important to know that there are possibilities, that if I can meet a car accident, I will avoid going by car on a long trip. And I believe that karma (cause and effect) works, and that causes may connect with each other in a way that will not be positive for me. For instance, if my husband left me, it's not clear if that's positive or negative for me. It can be positive because I will be able to start a new life. I can come to understand that things can turn out this way and that I don't have to be angry or furious when they indeed turn out that way.

It is very important to look for the causes, why something happened, what I should learn from it, what it should bring me. So the soul or mind can be healed.

Alternative spirituality is usually embraced by informal groups of people who do not share a common ideology, as in the traditional churches. However, the people involved in alternative spirituality may have similar life philosophies (i.e. attitudes, beliefs, not a coherent system of representations); at the same time, engaging in alternative spirituality may influence one's perception or interpretation of events. The topics discussed during alternative-spirituality sessions are to some extent similar to those discussed in doctrinal religions: what is good and what is not, how one and others should behave, how relationships should look like, how to protect oneself from different kinds of threats (material or non-material), etc. There are not only recurrent topics discussed during the sessions but also recurrent patterns in the interpretations and explanations of experiences. This is not surprising. As Bernsten and Bohn argue, life scripts are based on locally dominant cultural models: 'A life script is a mental representation of culturally expected life events and their age norms' (Bernsten and Bohn 2009, 64). A culture 'prescribes' a prototypical life course and influences our communication about our life, expectations, and plans. As the informants share (at least to some extent) their culturally influenced life script, they can relate to one another's situations if/when this script (that our individual life stories are influenced by our personal choices but are sometimes just coincidences, and also relate to our close family members' life stories) is *disrupted*; they can empathise with each other and subsequently support (even implicitly) each other in terms of the explanations and interpretations of such 'disruptions' that give them a special meaning.

CONCLUSION

As we argued before (Jerotijević and Hagovská 2019), group experience is an important part of alternative spirituality. Humans are social beings who need mainly (but not only) social support in times of stress and insecurity. Urban environments and the current way of living challenge these needs; people live far from their families, may have problematic relationships with the other members of their family (in this study, the issues that were most often discussed were those concerning the study participants' relationships with their close relatives, such as their mother, father, sister or partner). It is possible that those who are attracted to alternative spirituality are those with specific psychological profiles (we did not study this), who find this form of emotional and social support important. The study by Willard and Norenzayan (2017) demonstrated that people who are 'spiritual but not religious' are more likely to hold paranormal beliefs and to have an experiential relationship with the supernatural.

Many of our informants stressed that they *feel safe* in their respective alternative-spirituality groups, sometimes even that they have never felt as safe anywhere else. Bonding and the emotions felt in the community played an important role in the study participants' general perception of such groups. On the other hand, there was an opinion that spiritual gatherings are too overwhelming and intense, which could be a negative aspect of such gatherings.

People attend alternative-spirituality sessions for different reasons. Most of the informants started to attend such sessions by chance, but many had been attending them long before the start of this study. Most of the informants were struggling with a life situation and were trying out different ways of coping with it, such as through formal psychotherapy, biomedical treatment in the case of illness, sometimes also alternative medicine, yoga, etc. They could combine multiple methods to solve a problem or different problems.

Psychological explanations of alternative spirituality approach them as a form of coping strategy: that people use them to deal with stressful life situations, as a form of emotional coping (Folkman and Lazarus 1988). While we agree with this explanation, we ask the following questions: Why is alternative spirituality used for such purpose? How can the popularity of

alternative spirituality be explained? Is it possible to define the concrete mechanisms of this? According to Paloutzian (2005), spirituality helps people (re)find the meaning of their life situations. Spiritual explanations can be interesting to some people under some circumstances because they are cognitively attractive; that is, they 'make sense' (things happen for a reason), but at the same time they sacralise human experiences, giving them a deeper meaning. Even though each informant in this study had problems and life challenges, such experiences were not unique to her. Therefore, individual experiences may be 'placed' in an already 'predefined spiritual scenario' that is comprehensible but at the same time has an explanatory value. Some of these 'scenarios' refer to metaphors that are easy to understand and can be applied to different contexts. At the same time, our minds work in such a way that we see single events from a certain perspective and look for a connection among events. We are coming up with stories all the time; we tend to make even simple daily events interesting and try to engage our listeners through the way we talk about such events. How and what people talk about, and their experiences, can change within the realm of time and space and depend on the sociocultural context. Frank (Frank 1995, 53), analysing how seriously ill people talk about their illnesses, said: '*Stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations*'. Murray (1999, in Willing 2013) suggests that when we describe our experiences, '*we use narratives that are already within our culture*'. To the participants in this study, spiritual interpretations became meaningful in times of uncertainty or life imbalance (e.g. coping with a child's autism or dealing with infidelity, infertility, the father's alcoholism, the lack of support from the mother). According to some authors, religious/spiritual goals may have a positive influence on a person's general well-being (Emmons et al. 1998, in Martos et al. 2012), but giving a spiritual dimension post hoc to already-experienced events may help as well. Through alternative spirituality, the informants may come to understand (maybe "only" symbolically) stressful events or experiences. Further research is needed, however, to determine how alternative spirituality can respond to big questions (Taves, Asprem and Ihm 2018) and whether it has only a short-term effect or a long-term one (the latter also suggesting its importance), and to study in a more in-depth way the recurrent schemas and interpretations in the study participants' 'scenarios'.

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