



A Rapid Review of the Interrelations Between Spirituality, Self-Transcendence, and Prosociality

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Abstract

It is increasingly acknowledged that spirituality often exists outside of religious frameworks, and the number of individuals identifying as spiritual but not religious is increasing around the world. Moreover, spirituality has been associated with a variety of positive intrapersonal and interpersonal effects rooted in self-transcendence. However, unlike religiosity, there have been few attempts to synthesize the literature on the relations between nonreligious spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality. This rapid review analyzes 53 studies related to these variables, revealing a consistent association between self-transcendence and prosociality. The review also identifies spiritual antecedents for prosocial behaviors across a broad range of ages and cultures, however, associations between these variables and spirituality remain unclear due to an overabundance of conceptualizations and associated measures. Consensus on the assessment of spirituality has not been reached due to insufficient research beyond cross-sectional methods and samples from 'WEIRD' countries. Furthermore, the review highlights the positive impacts of prosocial behavior and its drivers on well-being.

Keywords Spirituality · Self-transcendence · Prosociality · Well-being

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Introduction

The relationship between religiosity and prosociality is well documented (Kelly et al., 2024; Shariff et al., 2015), with many studies suggesting that aspects of religion allow adherents to transcend their own goals and concerns to focus on the needs of others. Religiosity, by promoting empathetic values (Saroglou et al., 2004) and creating communal events (Van Cappellen et al., 2016), has thus been associated with increased prosocial behavior. However, recent years have seen a significant decline in religious identification (Inglehart, 2021). This raises the question: If organized religion is in decline, will prosocial motivation and behavior also decrease? While the terms religion and spirituality were once seen as synonymous and interchangeable (Idler et al., 2003), there is an increasing recognition—both among the research community and laypeople—that spirituality can exist and even flourish outside of organized religion as nonreligious spirituality (Schnell, 2011). Recent years have seen increases in those identifying as *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR), with more personal, fluid, and inclusivist approaches to questions of ultimate purpose and meaning gaining traction in many countries of the world (Wixwat & Saucier, 2020). While religiosity's prosocial outcomes are often limited to ingroups (Roth, 2017), spirituality is not tied to any group and is therefore more closely linked to universal prosociality (Piotrowski & Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2020). However, research into nonreligious spirituality remains in its infancy, with far fewer reviews and meta-analyses compared to the academic literature on religion. This review seeks to address, this issue by providing the first review of the extant research on nonreligious spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality.

Spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality

In recent years, researchers have increasingly sought to differentiate spirituality from religiosity (Barker, 2008). It has been defined as the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life (Koenig et al., 2001), what Hill and Pargament (2003) described as *the sacred*. This quest is generally concerned with making sense of one's place in life but can also include a transcendent element of detaching from the physical world (Koenig, 2008; Pargament, 2013). Nonreligious spirituality, which proposes a more subjective and independent form of belief (Sheldrake, 2012), is a growing phenomenon due to the continuous decline in religiosity around the world (Inglehart, 2021). People who are SBNR therefore form a heterogeneous group with a wide range of idiosyncratic beliefs distinguished from world religions. However, the research does not suggest that being SBNR means being opposed to religion, nor that it is a stable identity (Tong & Yang, 2018). Instead, SBNR individuals are described as having an increased need for a sense of meaning in life that may go beyond the self but entails a connection with the sacred on personalized terms (Linders, 2024). This emphasis on meaning that extends beyond the individual aligns closely with the core idea of self-transcendence.

Self-transcendence is an important concept not only in religiosity but also in the area of spirituality (Reed, 2021). It increases one's connection to others and the environment by expanding self-boundaries (Yaden et al., 2017) and is also concerned with finding meaning in life (Wong, 2016). Self-transcendence therefore refers to a sense of being part of something greater than oneself, which has been framed as a basic human value (Schwartz, 1992). A key aspect of this understanding is the ability to expand one's relationship with

others, which serves as a resource for both spirituality and prosociality through interpersonal interactions (Haugan, 2014; Reed & Haugan, 2021).

Prosociality is defined as “voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another” (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 92). A recent meta-analysis found that religiosity increased believers’ prosocial behavior but noted substantial differences between self-reported and exhibited prosociality (Kelly et al., 2024). The positive impact of self-transcendence on prosocial behavior has repeatedly been demonstrated (Schwartz, 2012; van Kleef & Lelieveld, 2022). Other research suggests that religiosity has an influence on the relationship between self-transcendence and prosociality as well (Russo et al., 2022; Stellar et al., 2017). However, it remains unclear whether this influence is caused by specific religious variables. This raises the question of whether people who are SBNR may also act more prosocially because self-transcendence is a common theme in both religiosity and spirituality, but no attempt has been made to map the combinations in which these constructs have been conceptualized, manipulated, and measured.

The present research

Despite a substantial body of research exploring the interconnections between spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality, no comprehensive synthesis of these findings has been performed. Several reviews have investigated the role of religion in prosocial behavior (Shariff et al., 2015; Tsang et al., 2021), but none have been conducted about spirituality specifically, even though spirituality has been individually related to both self-transcendence (Worth & Smith, 2021) and cooperation (Rabell & Bastons, 2020). The present research addresses this gap by systematically reviewing the psychology literature on the links between spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality. Specifically, we aimed to characterize the field by examining (a) the participant populations and geographical contexts studied, (b) the predominant methodologies and research designs, (c) the measures utilized, and (d) the directions identified for future research, as well as (e) provide a summary of the evidence for relationships between these constructs. Our goal was to map the strengths and limitations of the current research in this area, thereby equipping scholars with a clearer understanding of the field’s landscape and providing guidance for integrating and advancing this diverse literature.

Method

This rapid review followed the Cochrane guidelines (Garritty et al., 2021). Due to the absence of prior reviews in the area, the main objective was to create an overview of the main drivers in the relationship between the variables of interest, including direct and indirect as well as associated factors.

Database and search strategies

The literature search was conducted in the APA PsycINFO database as psychological studies were of primary interest. Additional databases, namely, Scopus, Proquest, and Web of Science, were also searched, but these searches did not increase the body of identified studies. The search query included spiritual*, self-transcend*, and prosocial*, which were all individually paired with each other. The search query was further limited to

English-language articles that were not older than 10 years, with search terms appearing either in the title or in the abstract.

The screening of the relevant literature removed duplicates and inaccessible literature and also narrowed the scope by using the SPIDER framework (Cooke et al., 2012). The full inclusion and exclusion criteria used for this review are specified in Table 1.

Data extraction

Our search strategy used the following search query: tiab((spiritual* AND self-transcend*) OR (spiritual* AND prosocial*) OR (self-transcend* AND prosocial*). The search was executed on June 12, 2024, and the following steps were completed by a single reviewer and were regularly discussed with a second reviewer. The PRISMA flow diagram according to the Cochrane guidelines (Page et al., 2021) in Fig. 1 depicts the selection of eligible articles and summarizes the reasons for the exclusions.

Practical screening All duplicates, reviews, psychometrics, and qualitative works were identified and removed in the first screening process. After retrieving the full texts whenever possible, full-text screening was conducted to identify the sources that would ultimately be considered eligible for inclusion in the review. This entailed a further investigation into the details of the samples and the chosen research approaches. Additionally, studies were screened to ensure that the keywords of the current review were implemented in their study design rather than mentioned in an unrelated context. Most exclusions were

Table 1 SPIDER Framework

Element	Criteria
Sample	Studies must include nonreligious participants but may include religious cohorts for comparative purposes. Studies which are only investigating religious aspects of spirituality were therefore excluded, while those sharing secular aspects remained in the body of data in the first stage of the screening
Phenomenon of Interest	Studies must include the search terms as part of their study designs. In the case of spirituality, it should incorporate both secular and supernatural beliefs, while prosociality may be conceptualized as tendencies and behaviors (e.g., helping or charitable behavior and intentions). At least two keywords have to appear in the title or the abstract and be sufficiently used throughout the article (detailed description on pages 8 and 9)
Design	The inclusionary criteria restricted the review to quantitative, empirical studies such as descriptive, longitudinal, and experimental studies. This excluded theoretical works, documentation of psychometric procedures, reviews, and qualitative works. Such entries were generally targeted by PsycINFO's automatic tagging function, which was complemented by manual screening
Evaluation	Included articles may either assess the mentioned variables through behavioral tasks or self-report. Studies were evaluated for the suitability of their measures by the framing of the keywords. A manual screening ultimately determined whether the desired approaches had been used. If the evaluation process was explicitly mentioned in the abstract, articles were exempt from full-text screening
Research Type	Lastly, only quantitative and mixed-methods studies were considered. This evaluation criterion required full-text screening to determine eligibility. After the full-text screening, the research types were again screened using the tags to exclude those studies categorized as qualitative but not mixed-methods

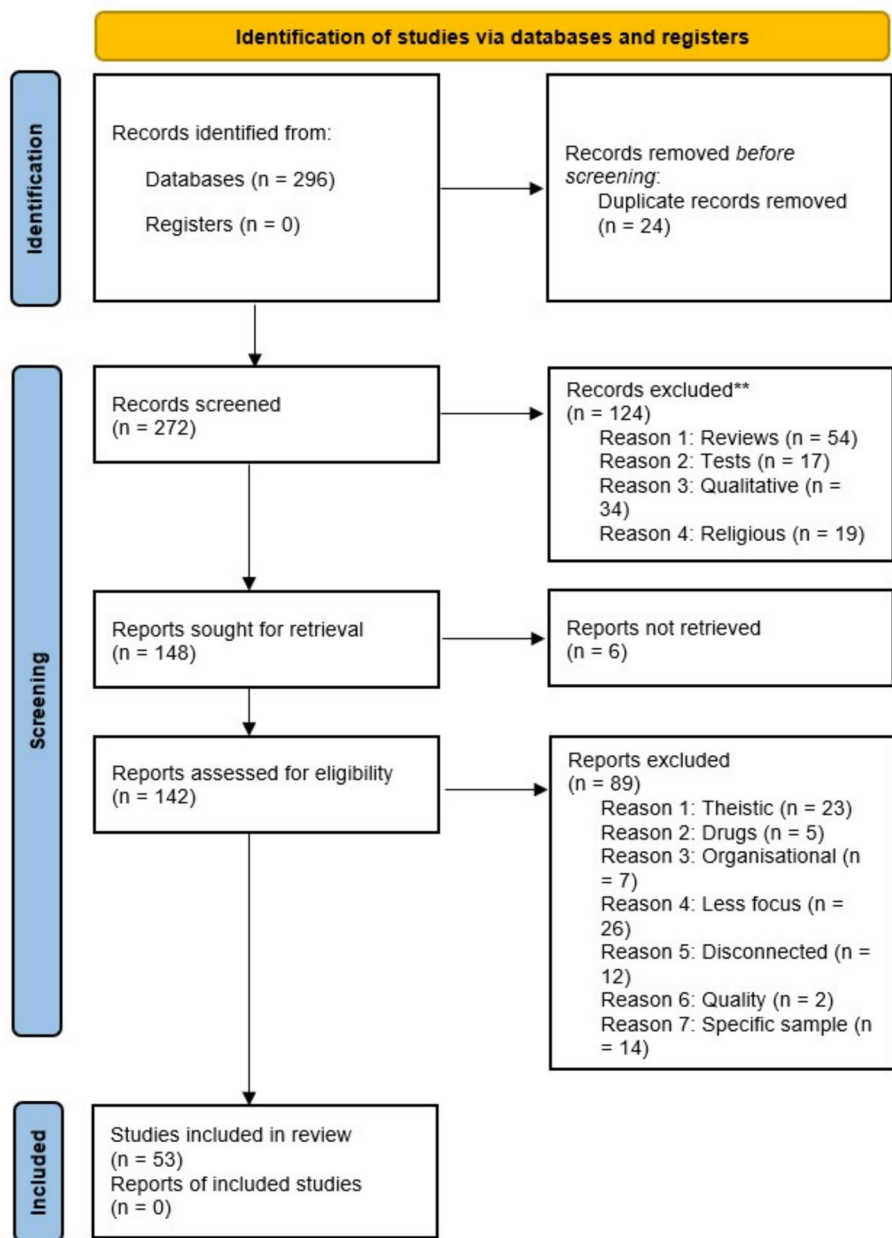


Fig. 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

made due to either insufficient focus on the keywords or a missing connection between the keywords in the research design. The extracted data were then discussed for their correctness and completeness with a second reviewer.

Quality assessment and risk of bias The journals in which the studies were published were assessed and further exclusions were made if an article was published in a journal that did not achieve at least one Q1 ranking in a psychology-related category according to SCImago. This decision was made to ensure a certain level of study quality and relevance to this review (Falagas et al., 2008). Two studies did not meet these criteria: one was published in a Q2 psychology journal, and the other was published in a journal unrelated to psychology. We also decided to retain relevant PhD dissertations. These criteria were discussed with a second reviewer to avoid making inappropriate exclusions.

Data synthesis

The results were synthesized into two categories. The first category summarized and compared the study characteristics, including the demographics of the sample, the study designs, the measures utilized, and the suggested future directions. In the second category, the relationships among the keywords were assessed. Direct correlations between the phenomena of interest were thereby prioritized, followed by mediating and moderating findings and finally by connections to indirect variables. This ensured the prioritization of the most suitable data to describe the connection between spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality.

Results

Key study details and characteristics can be found in Table 2. In our analysis, we first characterized the extant literature in terms of the methodologies, theories, participants, designs, and future directions. We then synthesized the findings from the included studies to gain a deeper understanding of the relations between the three variables. Figure 2 provides a visualization of the identified relationships, with the three key constructs forming a triangle. Evidence for direct association is indicated by green lines, mediation and moderation by yellow lines, and third variables by red lines.

Methodological and theoretical analysis

The following sections discuss the content of the studies included in this review. Table 2 lists the included studies, including author details, sample descriptions, and study designs.

Participants The samples of the studies included in this review diverged notably in terms of their size, age, gender distribution, and cultural background. The review included 32,835 participants from 53 studies, with sample sizes ranging from 39 to 3,347. The mean number of participants was 619.53, while the median stood at 399. This disparity was caused by a few studies with comparatively large samples (Li et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2020; Piotrowski & Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2024). The studies included participants from all age categories as the median age ranged from three (Song et al., 2021) to 85 (Haugan, 2014) years with an overall median of 29 years. Female participants were slightly overrepresented as the gender distribution was 59% on average. The samples included participants from 23 countries; the most common were the United States (23 samples), China (including Hong Kong; 12 samples), Israel (four samples),

Table 2 Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Review

Author (Year)	Country	N	Age ^a	Female ^a	Variables	Study Design
Abramson et al. (2018)	Israel	243	8	44%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Acevedo and Tost (2023)	USA	331	N/A	73%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Ardelt et al. (2023)	USA, Canada, China, Iran Serbia, Ukraine	630	46–55	50–59%	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Benedict-Montgomery (2014)	USA	372	30	47%	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Benish-Weisman et al. (2019)	Australia	586	9	51%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Büssing et al. (2022)	Germany	731	24	73%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Castelo et al. (2021)	USA	414	38	44–57%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional, Experimental
Chirico et al. (2023)	Italy	200	31	69%	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Clayton et al. (2021)	USA	57	20	79%	ST, PB	Experimental
Condon (2015)	USA	39	25	74%	S, PB	Experimental
Diebels (2016)	USA	216	34	50%	S, PB	Experimental
Dong et al. (2017)	China	440	21–32	61%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Dong et al. (2019)	China	288	21–33	32–77%	S, ST, PB	Experimental
Elizarov et al. (2024)	Israel	121	6	49%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Erickson et al. (2024)	USA	746	19–47	N/A	S, ST, PB	Mixed methods
Grunet (2020)	USA	520	18	60%	ST, PB	Longitudinal
Guo et al. (2022)	China	429	12	45%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Guo et al. (2021)	China	508	20	54%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Haugan et al. (2016)	Norway	202	N/A	N/A	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Haugan (2014)	Norway	202	85	46%	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Ho et al. (2016)	Singapore	153	21	75%	ST, PB	Experimental
Jacobs and McConnell (2022)	USA	266	19	55%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Johnstone et al. (2018)	USA	98	15	67%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Kahn and Cargile (2021)	USA	342	39	44–65%	ST, PB	Experimental
Kim et al. (2018)	South Korea	591	42	N/A	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Lavy and Benish-Weisman (2021)	Israel	344	17	51%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional

Table 2 (continued)

Author (Year)	Country	N	Age ^a	Female ^a	Variables	Study Design
Li et al. (2019)	China	3347	N/A	50%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Li et al. (2022)	China, USA	2229	40	N/A	ST, PB	Longitudinal
Li et al. (2024)	USA	3055	19–41	52–78%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional, Experimental
Liao et al. (2022)	USA	620	39	51%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Lin et al. (2021)	China	3080	21	67%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Lin et al. (2020)	China	1907	21	68%	S, ST, PB	Cross-sectional
McDonald et al. (2015)	USA, Israel	911	14	51–54%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Moise and Saroglou (2024)	UK	547	31	59%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Monteoliva et al. (2018)	Spain	717	22	62%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Myrvy et al. (2021)	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Portugal	758	23	82%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Nelson et al. (2024)	USA	619	38	53%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Piotrowski and Żemojtel-Piotrowska (2024)	Poland	1514	43–49	52–55%	S, ST	Longitudinal
Pohling et al. (2019)	USA	118	21	40%	ST, PB	Experimental
Politi et al. (2021)	UK	399	32	72%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Politi et al. (2024)	USA, India	954	34	49%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Rathore (2022)	USA	509	40	56%	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Russo et al. (2022)	Italy	140	17	63%	ST, PB	Longitudinal
Russo et al. (2023)	Italy	140	17	63%	ST, PB	Longitudinal
Saslow (2014)	USA	134	35	40%	S, PB	Cross-sectional
Song et al. (2021)	Netherlands, China, India	229	3	50%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Steen et al. (2023)	Netherlands	194	28	80%	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Tooper et al. (2023)	Türkiye	129	35	72%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Trivedi et al. (2016)	India	120	67	N/A	S, ST	Cross-sectional
Williams (2017)	USA	161	58	58%	S, ST	Experimental
Wong (2021)	China (HK), Canada	528	14	N/A	ST, PB	Cross-sectional
Wong and Konishi (2024)	China (HK)	439	14	55%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional

Table 2 (continued)

Author (Year)	Country	N	Age ^a	Female ^a	Variables	Study Design
Zhao (2018)	USA	268	20	70%	ST, PB	Cross-sectional

Note. PB = Prosocial behavior, S = Spirituality, ST = Self-transcendence

^a Mean age and gender distribution (share of females) of samples in multi-study articles are displayed as ranges

India and Italy (three samples each). Seven studies engaged in cross-cultural research and included samples from multiple countries. Some studies recruited specific populations, the most common of which were university students (18 studies). Other common recruitment groups were minors (10 studies) and elderly people (three studies).

The pool of measures was very broad among all included studies. In the area of self-transcendence, seven different questionnaires were used. The most common tool was the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001), which was employed by nine studies.

Awe-related studies often used specific measures, such as the Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale (Shiota et al., 2006), which was referenced in six studies. Regarding prosociality, only four questionnaires were used including the Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM; Carlo & Randall, 2002), which was used three times. Another prominent approach to measure prosociality was behavioral tasks and peer rating, which appeared in five studies each. Spirituality research showed a less clear picture, with almost every study using a different form of assessment. In total, 21 different tools were used, and only a few scales such as the Spiritual Transcendence Index (Seidlitz et al., 2002) and the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (Piedmont, 1999) were used in more than one study. While some of these scales referred to self-transcendence, no spirituality scales explicitly related to prosociality were used. Scale use was also reflected in the theoretical frameworks, which were predominantly based on Schwartz's (1992) basic human values, with single notable mentions of Rogerian (Toper et al., 2023) and evolutionary (Saslow, 2014) theories.

Future directions Common desiderata also emerged in suggestions for future research. In 12 cases, longitudinal research was specifically mentioned as a way to improve the understanding of causal relationships among the variables as well as how they change over time. Ten studies noted a lack of understanding about the ways in which prosocial behaviors change and develop over longer periods of time. Deeper exploration of positive emotions and the promotion of diverse samples were other frequent recommendations; the need for more cross-cultural research was mentioned in 10 studies related to prosociality, in nine regarding self-transcendence, and in five in the domain of spirituality. Three of these studies noted that the areas of emotions and morality might especially benefit from more culturally diverse research. For example, cultural differences may exist in the emotional dispositions that result from certain sets of values (Jacobs & McConnell, 2022). In addition to culture, differences between ages and genders were also identified in four articles as important future directions across the areas of this review, especially self-transcendence.

Key findings involving self-transcendence and prosociality

The connection between self-transcendence and prosociality is well established in 29 of the 53 included studies, which generally position self-transcendence as an antecedent of prosociality. Values ($n=16$), emotions ($n=10$), motivation ($n=10$), sharing behaviors ($n=8$), awe ($n=6$), and experiences ($n=2$) are repeatedly mentioned. Several other variables are related to these themes, such as culture, threat perception, pride, nature, and social information processing.

In our review of this relationship, self-transcendent values emerged as an important area of study. Self-transcendence is involved in reorienting people's personal interests towards the welfare of others, suggesting that self-transcendence values provide a motivational base for prosociality (Grumet, 2020). In 19 studies, self-transcendent values were explicitly assessed. In five of these, the association with prosocial behaviors remained unassessed, but the remaining research shows a mostly conclusive picture. In 11 studies, a clear connection between self-transcendence and prosociality was found, and in four, self-transcendence was shown to have a predictive effect. However, two studies found no significant correlation, and in one other, the effect was only marginal.

The most frequently studied values were universalism and benevolence, addressed in five of the studies. These studies were built on Schwartz's (1992) framework, which defined universalism and benevolence as the sole components of self-transcendence.

Child development emerged as a common area for research on self-transcendent values in eight out of the 19 studies. Assessed developmental stages included kindergarten settings (Abramson et al., 2018; Elizarov et al., 2024), primary school (Benish-Weisman et al., 2019), and adolescence (McDonald et al., 2015). These studies show that values impact children's prosocial tendencies and later influence the social groups they join.

Another identified domain is self-transcendent emotions, which were identified in 10 of the 29 studies, two of which explicitly linked emotions to associated experiences. All sources found a positive relationship with prosociality. Out of all forms of self-transcendent emotions, awe emerged as the most prevalent in six of the 10 studies. Several studies found awe to predict prosociality in terms of willingness to volunteer (Kahn & Cargile, 2021), general helping behaviors (Li et al., 2019), and altruistic online behaviors (Lin et al., 2021). Other prominent self-transcendent emotions include gratitude and empathy, mentioned in three studies each.

Regarding social and cultural influences, we identified significant mediating and moderating factors on the relationship between self-transcendence and prosociality. Six of the 29 studies assessed moral frameworks; two focused on self-transcendent emotions, and the other four looked at self-transcendent values. While we found that self-transcendent emotions such as awe (Pohling et al., 2019) connect one's moral foundations with one's prosocial outlook (Acevedo & Tost, 2023), self-transcendent values contribute to increased empathy and willingness to take action on behalf of others (Politi et al., 2024). Six studies in our sample took cultural influences into account, such as individualism (Myrsky et al., 2021) and egalitarianism (Li et al., 2022; Politi et al., 2021). Self-transcendent emotions were also studied in relation to other feelings, such as inspiration (Liao et al., 2022) and pride (Ho et al., 2016). Another four studies assessed the impact of parenting styles on children's prosociality, such as either the emphasis on (Song et al., 2021) or control of (Wong, 2021; Wong & Konishi, 2024) autonomy, which can lead to different outcomes across cultures.

Key findings involving spirituality and self-transcendence

In the 11 studies examining the relationship between spirituality and self-transcendence, the varying definitions of spirituality and the definitional overlap with self-transcendence posed significant challenges for our synthesis. The most prominent components of spirituality that were linked to self-transcendence are compassion ($n=4$), meditation ($n=3$) and interconnectedness ($n=2$). We also found single mentions of universal concern (Piotrowski & Žemojtel-Piotrowska, 2024), spiritual intelligence (Benedict-Montgomery, 2014), and emotions (Chirico et al., 2023). In addition, the numerous mediators and moderators in the area of well-being include life satisfaction, quality of life, and meaning in life, which were examined in two studies each.

In examining spirituality's relationship with self-transcendence, a strong correlation emerged, with the two terms often overlapping and mentioned synonymously or in combination as "spiritual self-transcendence" (e.g., Benedict-Montgomery, 2014; Lin et al., 2020). We identified well-being as one recurring area; it was assessed in eight studies. In particular, in a study with elderly participants, higher intrapersonal self-transcendence was associated with better quality of life and mental health (Haugan, 2014; Haugan et al., 2016). In three studies, spiritual perspectives and self-transcendence impacted emotions by contributing to the expansion of self-boundaries. This process has been observed on the intra-, inter-, and even transpersonal levels, through which people have reported finding

greater meaning in life and reduced feelings of depression (Haugan et al., 2016; Trivedi et al., 2016). These effects can be facilitated through spiritual practices such as meditation, which supports mental health through the growth of self-transcendence (Kim et al., 2018) and increased feelings of interconnectedness (Haugan et al., 2016).

On a broader level, our results further indicate that spirituality and self-transcendence positively influence people's well-being through engagement with spiritual practices that are influenced by self-transcendent emotions such as awe, love, and compassion. While compassion surfaced in seven studies in relation to spiritual beliefs and in four under the framework of self-transcendent emotions, empathy was integrated in five studies. Increased well-being and life satisfaction were mentioned in six studies (e.g., Ardel et al., 2023; Grumet, 2020). Several studies in our sample confirmed a causal relationship, using self-transcendent content as priming material (e.g., Li et al., 2022; Williams, 2017). Clinical studies highlighted that intrapersonal self-transcendence and spiritual beliefs support well-being by nurturing meaning in life (Haugan et al., 2016; Steen et al., 2023).

Key findings involving spirituality and prosociality

We identified 10 articles that studied the relationship between spirituality and prosociality in our review. In these, spirituality mainly functions as a source for prosocial intentions. Associated factors were altruism ($n=5$), compassion ($n=3$), and personality traits ($n=2$), including openness and agreeableness. However, spirituality consists of not only mental but also behavioral factors, such as meditation, which emerged again in this part of the evaluation. The link between spirituality and prosociality is also mediated by gratitude, and the causal framework of experiencing a connection with the divine which is associated with empathy, morals, and belief that ultimately lead to well-being.

In the five studies mentioning altruism, two found a link to self-transcendence. Altruism may represent a driver of intrinsic motivation for prosociality, although two studies found this relationship to be fully mediated by moral emotions instead (Politi et al., 2021; Zhao, 2018). Spirituality was also connected to personality traits, which is highlighted in people's exploration of nontraditional forms of beliefs. Spirituality is related to agreeableness, which links prosocial dispositions to empathy, cooperation, and belief in a benevolent world (Moise & Saroglou, 2024). Furthermore, engaging in meditation can influence people's compassion as it increases their responsivity to the suffering of others by cultivating a state of heightened awareness and empathy (Condon, 2015). Two studies also found links to prosocial attitudes and behaviors. In one study, people who believed in oneness were more likely to donate to charities (Condon, 2015), and in the other, spiritual experiences predicted the prosocial spending of money and of one's own time, a relationship that was mediated by compassionate love (Dong et al., 2017).

Five articles specifically showed how moral positions can impact notions of spirituality and prosocial acts. The effects of spirituality are often embedded in frameworks of local traditions, but the promotion of virtues such as empathy, compassion, and altruism was a common outcome (Ardelt et al., 2023). Another common expression of spirituality found across cultures is meditation, which connects to self-transcendence through the practice of decentering, referring to meta-awareness regarding inner experiences without being attached to them (Rathore, 2022). Developmental factors influence this relationship as family relations mediate the connection between both the material and spiritual environment and children's prosocial behavior (Guo et al., 2022). Lastly, prosocial experiences were found to contribute to well-being in three studies, leading to positive emotional

states, social connectivity, and a sense of purpose (Guo et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2024). The engagement with moral principles can therefore significantly mediate the relationship between spirituality and prosociality (Dong et al., 2017).

Key findings involving spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality

Although many bilateral connections were identified, we only found three studies that incorporated all three search terms of the review. These studies highlighted the prosocial outcomes of the relationship between self-transcendence and spirituality, especially regarding moral questions. Lin and colleagues (2020) viewed awe as a lasting trait linked to prosocial behavior, influenced by self-transcendence and spirituality, supporting the small-self hypothesis. This relationship is similar to findings by Dong and colleagues (2019), which showed that reminders of mortality can enhance prosocial spending by fostering self-transcendence. Consequently, the alignment of spiritual beliefs with prosocial behavior can contribute to overall well-being as this supports a virtuous self-image (Erickson et al., 2024).

Discussion

This rapid review sought to provide the first systematic synthesis of psychological research on the links between spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosociality. In terms of theory, we identified a range of theoretical frameworks that have guided the research in this area. Regarding self-transcendence, self-transcendent values were most frequently based on Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic values. The significance of Schwartz's framework is its causal effect on prosocial behavior through its self-transcendent dimension (Schwartz, 2012). In contrast, self-transcendent emotions were often conceptualized within frameworks based on morality, such as the moral foundations theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2011). Although prosocial behavior was rarely conceptually discussed, elements of evolutionary theory, including kin selection and reciprocity, were often mentioned. Evolution holds significance for several domains of this review as it explains not only the necessity of prosocial behavior for group selection (Silk & House, 2016) but also the role of self-transcendence (Piff et al., 2015). In contrast, the spiritual dimension mostly relied on philosophical and Buddhist concepts.

Despite the lack of a framework encompassing all key domains of this review, the literature provided various clues about their interrelationships. Across all of the reviewed studies, prosociality was predominantly conceptualized as behavior or intentions and was measured as an outcome variable. Many self-transcendent elements were identified as drivers of prosociality, including values (Elizarov et al., 2024; Grumet, 2020; Lavy & Benish-Weisman, 2021), emotions such as awe (Li et al., 2019, 2024; Lin et al., 2021), and motivations and experiences (Acevedo & Tost, 2023). Spirituality was more commonly studied as a trait variable (Condon, 2015; Dong et al., 2017; Moise & Saroglou, 2024) and was also operationalized through meditation practices, which were studied in relation to both self-transcendence (Rathore, 2022) and prosociality (Condon, 2015). Spirituality was therefore primarily studied as an antecedent of prosociality and as a mediator in the relationship between self-transcendence and prosociality. These pathways reflect the overlap between

spirituality and self-transcendence, not only in their frameworks but also in their application, which challenges their study as separate concepts.

In the methodological analysis, we noted some consistent trends in terms of study designs, participant demographics, and the measures administered. One notable finding is that 70% of the included studies employed a cross-sectional design. Spirituality was particularly underrepresented in noncorrelational studies as it may be especially difficult to manipulate using experimental approaches. While this limits the amount of evidence for causal and temporal claims, it may also reflect the challenge of designing experiments and longitudinal projects in this area. For instance, the wide range of spirituality scales used may represent a lack of consensus on the nature of spirituality itself. Furthermore, the frequent overlap with other constructs, such as self-transcendence and religiosity, makes spirituality more difficult to isolate from related variables. This has significant ramifications for the study of spirituality as it hinders the quantitative comparison of spirituality's effects among studies. Heterogeneity among spirituality scores may arise due to several factors, such as differences in the form of assessment (single-item versus validated scale) and the theoretical foundation for the construction of these tools (e.g., a more secular vs. a more religious conceptualization of spirituality).

The extant literature also suffers from an overrepresentation of certain cultural groups. This is important as spiritual frameworks are often deeply embedded in their cultural context (Ardelt et al., 2023; Piotrowski & Žemojtel-Piotrowska, 2024). The predominance of U.S. and Chinese research, which makes up half of the pool of studies, therefore limits the findings regarding the diversity of spiritual beliefs globally. This unequal distribution also highlights the issue that the increase in non-WEIRD research in psychology is mainly driven by data from Confucian societies (Krys et al., 2024). However, studies from the Global South indicate spiritual beliefs are most prevalent in those cultures that remain the least explored (Gez et al., 2021; Maraldi & Farias, 2019). Similar challenges to the equal representation of study designs (Smith, 2011) and genders (Walton et al., 2024) have been found in prior studies and across various fields of research in psychology. Some studies also measured prosociality based on self-report, which often skews results.

The lack of a consensus concerning the definition and assessment of spirituality may be a consequence of these factors as the phenomenon has not yet been tested in sufficiently diverse cultural and experimental settings. This may be the underlying reason why studies concerned with spirituality use a broad range of surveys, which challenges the comparability of the results. Issues exist regarding how to assess different aspects of spirituality (Dong et al., 2017) and its overlap with religious contexts (Lee et al., 2014). To improve the comparability of future studies, we stress the need to establish an agreed-upon definition of spirituality.

Lastly, several implications for future research are discussed in the studies we assessed. The diversification of research designs is needed to provide data beyond a correlational nature and draw conclusions about causal and long-term effects. Most of the longitudinal research has been undertaken in the domain of values; their associations with temperament (Abramson et al., 2018) and culture (Russo et al., 2022) and their consistency over time (Grumet, 2020) need to be studied further. Similarly, more causal data may improve the distinction between spirituality and self-transcendence. Research concerned with spirituality should also use more qualitative approaches to further develop its understanding, which may be needed to conceptualize spirituality more distinctly (Ardelt et al., 2023). The lack of consensus regarding spirituality scales further hampers the comparability between studies, which should be resolved by identifying agreed-upon measures for researching spirituality in specific contexts. However, methods to assess spirituality beyond questionnaires may also be considered. Moreover, very

few of the studies in the review included all variables of interest, highlighting the need to better understand spirituality's role in transforming values into behavior to reach sound conclusions about its role in the relationship.

Limitations and recommendations

The present research has several limitations. The restricted nature of this review limited the scope of included studies due to the consideration of only one database and the screening being performed by a single researcher. This may have influenced the lack of relevant spiritual studies in the final body of literature as more studies could have been collected from other sources and in the gray literature. The exclusion of studies published more than 10 years ago and of studies not published in Q1 journals also reduced the number of included studies. Furthermore, the context surrounding the assessed relationships could only be analyzed on a broad level due to the complexity of their interplay.

Future reviews may analyze the concepts we studied in greater detail regarding their theoretical framing and their methods. For example, the operationalizations of spirituality could be analyzed with a meta-analysis of the spiritual questionnaires and their correlations with prosociality might be examined. Differences between self-reported and behavior-based prosocial behaviors could also be considered to understand this relationship in greater detail. Researchers might utilize our findings to better understand people's motivation (or lack thereof) to act prosocially in the contexts we studied. Practitioners could benefit from the finding that nonreligious individuals can hold spiritual beliefs that exert prosocial tendencies similar to religiosity, especially in relation to self-transcendence. Lastly, educators might raise awareness and acceptance of SBNR beliefs by highlighting their relationship with prosociality.

Conclusion

This review examined the relationship between nonreligious spirituality, self-transcendence, and prosocial outcomes across 53 studies. It found a strong link between self-transcendence and prosocial behavior. However, it also identified methodological and conceptual gaps in the existing research on spirituality. Spirituality remains an underrepresented and insufficiently understood phenomenon in comparison to self-transcendence and prosociality.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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