



Belonging to religious communities—a source of stress or satisfaction? Analysis of gender differences

Przynależność do wspólnot religijnych – źródło stresu czy satysfakcji? Analiza różnic międzypłciowych¹

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Abstract: *Introduction:* Dialogue is an inseparable element of the functioning of social groups, including religious communities. The article shows how being in dialogue with God and people by belonging to religious communities among young Catholics corresponds with the perceived stress in its various areas (e.g. related to health, interpersonal relations, socioeconomic conditions or religiosity) and with life satisfaction, both in the group of boys and men, as well as in the group of girls and women. *Method:* The gender differences in the identified 18 areas of experienced stress and life satisfaction were analyzed. The study was conducted using the author's questionnaire and the SWLS scale in the paper-and-pencil version on a group of 407 young Catholics belonging and not belonging to religious communities. *Results:* The results indicate that belonging to a religious community differentiates the level of experienced stress only in the area of religiosity (no differences were noted in terms of stress as a whole) and differentiated the level of life satisfaction. It turns out that gender differentiates the level of experienced stress both in the group of people belonging and not belonging to the religious community and in the entire studied sample. Women in all groups are characterized by a higher level of experienced stress. Selected areas of experienced stress, which are differentiated by gender and which concern interpersonal relations and the political situation, have been described. Gender also differentiates the level of life satisfaction. In the entire group of respondents, men indicate a higher level of life satisfaction than women. Life satisfaction, on the other hand, negatively correlates with the assessment of experienced stress, which is confirmed by the already existing reports on this subject. *Conclusions:* Persons belonging to religious communities, treating religiosity as an important value in their lives, feel a higher level of stress in this area. In addition, they experience stress on a very similar level to that of their non-religious peers, but at the same time they are characterized by a higher level of life satisfaction. The results of the study indicate the potential of religious communities and suggest a special sensitivity towards girls and women whose psychological situation is more difficult in the area of experienced stress and life satisfaction than the assessment of these aspects by boys and men.

Keywords: religious community, stress, life satisfaction, gender differences

Abstrakt: *Wstęp:* Dialog jest nieodłącznym elementem funkcjonowania grup społecznych, w tym wspólnot religijnych. Artykuł przedstawia, jak bycie w dialogu z Bogiem i ludźmi poprzez przynależność do wspólnot religijnych wśród młodych katolików koresponduje z odczuwanym stresem w różnych jego obszarach (m.in. dotyczącym zdrowia, relacji interpersonalnych, warunków socjoekonomicznych, czy religijności) oraz z satysfakcją z życia, zarówno w grupie chłopców i mężczyzn, jak i w grupie dziewcząt oraz kobiet. *Metoda:* Poddano analizie różnice międzypłciowe w wyodrębnionych 18 obszarach doświadczanego stresu i w obrębie satysfakcji z życia. Badanie przeprowadzono autorską ankietą oraz skalą SWLS w wersji papier-olówek na grupie 407 młodych katolików przynależących i nieprzynależących do wspólnot religijnych. *Wyniki:* Wyniki wskazują, że przynależność do wspólnoty religijnej różnicuje poziom doświadczanego stresu jedynie w obszarze religijności (nie odnotowano różnic w obrębie stresu ujętego całościowo) oraz różnicuje poziom satysfakcji z życia. Okazuje się, że płeć różnicuje poziom doświadczanego stresu zarówno w grupie osób przynależących, jak i nieprzynależących do wspólnoty religijnej oraz w całej badanej próbie. Kobiety we wszystkich grupach charakteryzują się wyższym poziomem doświadczanego stresu. Opisano wybrane obszary doświadczanego stresu, które są różnicowane przez płeć, a które dotyczą relacji interpersonalnych oraz sytuacji politycznej. Płeć różnicuje ponadto poziom satysfakcji z życia. W całej grupie osób badanych mężczyźni wskazują na wyższy poziom satysfakcji z życia, aniżeli kobiety. Satysfakcja z życia natomiast negatywnie koreluje z oceną doświadczanego stresu, co potwierdzają istniejące już doniesienia na ten temat. *Wnioski:* Osoby przynależące do wspólnot religijnych, traktując religijność jako istotną wartość w swoim życiu, odczuwają wyższy poziom stresu w tym obszarze. Poza tym przeżywają stres na bardzo podobnym poziomie, co ich rówieśnicy niezaangażowani religijnie, charakteryzując się jednak przy tym wyższym poziomem satysfakcji z życia. Wyniki badania wskazują na ogromny potencjał wspólnot religijnych i sugerują szczególną wrażliwość wobec dziewcząt i kobiet, których sytuacja psychologiczna jest trudniejsza w obszarze doświadczanego stresu i satysfakcji z życia niż ocena tych aspektów przez chłopców i mężczyzn.

Słowa kluczowe: różnice międzypłciowe, satysfakcja z życia, stres, wspólnota religijna

1 Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2022-2Pilarska.pdf>

Introduction

During adolescence and early adulthood, an individual often experiences stress, which is associated, among others, with biological changes, difficulties in preparing for adult life, adult roles and new tasks (Oleszkowicz, Senejko, 2015; Ziółkowska, 2015). Subjective well-being is defined, among others, on the basis of the relative absence of emotions perceived as unpleasant (Diener, Scollon, Lucas, 2004), so experiencing stress is important for the level of satisfaction with life. Catholics try to look for support in their environment, including by belonging to religious communities. Research indicates that religious commitment is related to life satisfaction (Haidt, 2007; Steger, Frazier, 2005; Zimbardo, Johnson, McCann, 2017), and belonging to a religious group indirectly reduces symptoms of depression (Petts, Jolliff, 2008), which, as a consequence, may reduce the intensity of experienced stress. It was decided to check the above relationships in religious groups of Polish Catholics, taking into account gender differences, which in the context of research on religiosity are of significant importance. (comp. Marcysiak, 2009; Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, 2003; Talik, 2013).

1. Religious communities in the lives of young people

Being in relationships with others meets many basic human needs (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2012; Wojciszke, 2021), hence a natural human activity is dialogue and the need to be a member of social groups. A social group is formed by individuals who interact with each other, who are interdependent in meeting their needs and achieving goals. Participants of the social group have the task of acting for the common good. The groups are very diverse and they function differently, if only because of their size. The social group is characterized by its own norms, hierarchy and assigned roles (Czyżowska, 2005). In the era of postmodernity, religious communities are gaining more and more popularity, often fulfilling the function of defense against fear and enabling the satisfaction of the need for contact with the Absolute

and the related values. According to the definition, “a religious community is a group of people who are in a relationship with God and with each other and the way of being in a group is determined by the norms adopted by the group, which relate to religious practices (the way of worship); mutual interactions and jointly performed tasks” (Kusz, 2007, p. 3). Recently, the functioning of such communities on the Internet has also been observed, including on social networking sites (Cabak, 2020). This is even more important now, in the era of a pandemic, when young people are looking for, among other things, a virtual parish community (Mariański, 2021). Despite this, however, the use of support in religious communities has been significantly limited due to COVID-19 (Parker, Haskins, Lee, Hailemeskel, Adepoju, 2021). Commitment to community activities is often an expression of a change in the former life of a young person. At this point, it is worth returning to the sources and the timeless words by Pope John Paul II in 1979 at Victory Square in Warsaw: “Let your Spirit descend! Let Your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth! The face of this land!”. They were understood, among other things, as an incentive to strengthen a sense of community and brotherhood (Ostrowska, 2015). Pope John Paul II emphasized the importance of helping the sick, the weak, the suffering, the excluded and the lost. In Gdańsk in 1987, he said to young people: “Each of you, young friends, also finds some Westerplatte in your life. A dimension of tasks that must be undertaken and fulfilled. Some righteous cause that you cannot help but fight for. Some duty, duty that cannot be avoided. You cannot desert”, wanting to encourage young people when confronted with the needs of others. The Pope also showed concern for the Catholic Church as a community of believers (“Look for this truth where it really is! If necessary, be determined to go against the current of popular views and propagated slogans! Do not be afraid of the Love that challenges people”) and argued that dialogue and meeting facilitate solving the problems of the contemporary world and everyday difficulties, and the period of adolescence is the time that espe-

cially needs it (“Youth is the time when a person feels the greatest need for acceptance and support, when he or she most wants to be heard and loved”). These numerous quotes by Karol Wojtyła and his activities indicate the need to be part of the community, to find support in it, and to bring it to the other members. Such commitment, however, always comes with benefits and losses, so the question arises: what is the importance of belonging and the associated dialogue in communities for young people? Does belonging to religious communities reduce the perceived stress, or is it its source? Is being in constant dialogue with other members of the community and with God important for the satisfaction with the life of young Catholics? And how do young girls and young men find themselves in the face of these challenges? Can we talk about gender differences?

2. Young Catholics’ Challenges: coping with stress and striving for well-being

Adolescence is a time of numerous and dynamic changes, both quantitative and qualitative, that result in the achievement of relative psychosocial and sexual maturity. They largely determine the functioning of people in further development periods (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1973; Obuchowska, 1983, 1996). In a dynamically changing reality, it is difficult to deal effectively with the stressful demands placed on people in various situations, so they are often exposed to crisis-like experiences (Bauman, 2000). Sometimes the crisis is motivating, but not everyone is able to use it in a creative way (Dąbrowski, 1986), which is associated with experiencing stress. W. Oniszczenko (1988) describes stress as a reaction to the demands placed on the body (in the biological and psychological dimension), as a system of conditions that burden a human being (mainly related to deprivation, overload, difficulty, threat and motivational conflict) and as a specific type of human-environment relationship. Numerous needs, changes and developmental tasks in adolescence and early adulthood may cause confusion of roles, dissonance and disturbance of homeostasis.

They make up the image of the youth crisis, which is associated with numerous contradictions in the mental development of an individual (Oleszkowicz, 1995). Therefore, dealing with stress becomes everyday life, and experiencing it is an inevitable element of life. According to adolescents, one of the ways of coping with stress in the adolescent crisis is involvement in religion or ideology. Young people face numerous developmental difficulties, they want to relatively deal with them and experience joy and satisfaction with life, which can be understood as the general quality of life related to the criteria selected by the individual (Diener, Scollon, Lucas, 2004; Shin, Johnson, 1978).

3. Research procedure

The subject of the study was the intensification of stress in its various areas and the issue of satisfaction with the life of young Catholics, including members of religious communities, meeting in three types of communities: prayer communities, liturgical services and musical groups. The study was conducted using the paper-pencil method on a group of 407 people. An original questionnaire was used (the general level of stress and its 18 areas were examined: health, parents, siblings, extended family, peers / colleagues, spouse / partner, neighbours, teacher / employer, school / work, religiosity / spirituality, appearance, knowledge and skills, personality, financial situation, housing conditions, political situation, lack of free time, household duties; variables rated on a scale from 1 to 5) and the SWLS scale, created by E. Diener, R.A. Emmons, R. J. Larson, and S. Griffin (1985). The reliability of the original scale calculated on the basis of the internal consistency index is $\alpha = 0.87$, while the reliability of the repeatability of the test is $r = 0.82$ (Diener et al., 1985, Pilarska, 2012). In the Polish adaptation of the test, the reliability index is $\alpha = 0.81$, and the test repeatability reliability is $r = 0.86$ (Juczyński, 2001). The selection of the respondents for the sample was purposeful in terms of age (13-28 years old). The mean age of the respondents in the group belonging to a religious community was $M = 17$ years and 11 months ($SD = 2.75$), and in the group

of people not belonging to a religious community—M = 17 years and 5 months (SD = 2.09). The majority of the respondents were women—248 people (60.9%). Women constituted the majority both in the group belonging to and not belonging to the religious community: respectively in the belonging group 53.7%, and in the non-belonging group 66.5%. The average time spent on religious practice by the respondents per week was over three hours (3 hours and 10 minutes). On average, more time per week was devoted to religious practice by the respondents belonging to the religious community—it was less than 5 hours (4 hours and 50 minutes) compared to the group of non-belonging who spent on average about 2 hours (1 hour and 54 minutes). The average time of being a member of the community was over 5 years (5 years and 5 months). A longer period of membership was noted in the group of men (over 6 years) than in the group of women (less than 5 years). The R-Spearman correlation coefficient was used to determine the correlation between the two variables. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was also used to assess the differences of one trait between two populations (groups) and descriptive statistics.

4. Results

The largest number of young people indicated that the experienced stress is on the average level—170 people (41.8%), next at a moderately low level—78 people (19.2%). The least stated that the stress was very high—38 people (9.3%). In the group belonging to the community, the highest stress was average—42.4% and moderately low—20.3%, the least—very high stress—6.8%. In the group not belonging to the community, most people indicated average stress—41.3% and moderately low stress—18.3%, the least—very high stress—11.3% (Table 1).

The mean assessment of the level of experienced stress was 2.89 points, which is an average level. The scores in both analyzed groups were similar. A slightly higher average was recorded in the group of people not belonging to the community—2.90 points, in the group of people belonging to a reli-

Table 1. Assessment of the level of experienced stress

Belonging to religious community	Yes		No		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
very low	21	11,9	33	14,3	54	13,3
moderately low	36	20,3	42	18,3	78	19,2
average	75	42,4	95	41,3	170	41,8
moderately high	33	18,6	34	14,8	67	16,5
very high	12	6,8	26	11,3	38	9,3
total	177	100,0	230	100,0	407	100,0

Table 2. Differences in the assessment of the strength of experienced stress in selected areas between the compared groups, in terms of belonging to a community (U Mann-Whitney Test)

Stress aspect	Z	p level
Health	-0,532	0,595
Parents	-0,137	0,891
Siblings	1,276	0,202
Distant family	0,347	0,728
Peers/ Colleagues	0,156	0,876
Spouse/ Partner	-1,733	0,083
Neighbours	0,771	0,441
Teacher/ Employer	1,281	0,200
School/ Work	0,236	0,814
Religion/ Spirituality	2,099	0,036
Appearance	-0,143	0,886
Knowledge and skills	0,201	0,841
Personality	0,062	0,951
Financial situation	-0,066	0,947
Accommodation conditions	-0,483	0,629
Political situation	0,261	0,794
Lack of free time	0,348	0,728
Household chores	0,873	0,383

Table 3. Differences in the level of experienced stress between groups of women and men (U Mann-Whitney Test)

Belonging to community	Z	p level
Total	4,126	0,000
Yes	3,061	0,002
No	2,836	0,005

Table 4. Differences in the assessment of the strength of experienced stress in selected areas between groups of women and men in the group as a whole, among people belonging to and not belonging to religious communities. (U Mann-Whitney Test)

Stress aspect	Entire sample		People belonging to communities		People not belonging to communities	
	Z	p level	Z	p level	Z	p level
Health	1,270	0,204	0,502	0,616	1,144	0,252
Parents	1,862	0,063	1,203	0,229	1,401	0,161
Siblings	0,447	0,655	0,432	0,665	0,613	0,540
Distant family	-0,382	0,702	-1,802	0,072	1,250	0,211
Peers/Colleagues	0,749	0,454	-0,888	0,374	1,971	0,049
Spouse/ Partner	0,284	0,776	-1,647	0,099	1,448	0,148
Neighbours	-2,087	0,037	-2,895	0,004	0,078	0,938
Teacher/ Employer	-1,641	0,101	-2,284	0,022	0,198	0,843
School/ Work	1,430	0,153	0,269	0,788	1,809	0,070
Religion/ Spirituality	-1,662	0,096	-1,768	0,077	-0,147	0,883
Appearance	1,646	0,100	0,731	0,465	1,535	0,125
Knowledge and skills	1,715	0,086	0,772	0,440	1,701	0,089
Personality	0,097	0,923	-0,552	0,581	0,667	0,505
Financial situation	0,206	0,836	-0,860	0,390	1,152	0,249
Accommodation conditions	-0,548	0,584	-1,687	0,092	0,730	0,466
Political situation	-2,805	0,005	-3,558	0,000	-0,505	0,614
Lack of free time	0,083	0,934	0,524	0,601	-0,309	0,758
Household chores	0,342	0,732	-0,163	0,870	0,910	0,363

religious community the average level of experienced stress was recorded at the level of 2.88 points. There were no differences in the level of perceived stress between groups of people belonging to and not belonging to religious communities ($Z = -0.086$, $p > 0.05$). One statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the compared groups in terms of belonging to a religious community concerned one area of experienced stress, which is the area of religion, spirituality (Table 2).

There were statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between men and women in the level of experienced stress, both in the group as a whole and in subgroups of people belonging or not belonging to the community (Table 3).

Greater stress, both in the group of respondents as well as among people belonging to and not belonging to the religious community, was recorded in the group of women. In the group of women it was an average level (3.09), in the group of men it was also average (2.59), but on the verge of a moderately low

level. In the group of women and men who did not belong to religious communities, these indicators were lower than in the group of women and men belonging to religious communities. In the entire sample, statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between women and men were found in the assessment of the sources of experienced stress in the area of relations with neighbours and in relation to the political situation. A higher index of stress related to both difficulties in relations with neighbours and the political situation was recorded in the group of men (1.03 and 1.62, respectively). Moreover, there were statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between men and women belonging to a religious community regarding the assessment of the sources of experienced stress due to relations with neighbours, teachers / employers and due to the political situation. A higher stress index in all three analyzed aspects was obtained in the group of men belonging to a religious community (1.17; 2.04; 1.82, respectively). The only statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between

Table 5. Correlations between the results of life satisfaction (SWLS) and the level of experienced stress (R-Spearman correlation)

Belonging to community	N	R	t(N-2)	p level
Total	407	-0,319	-6,768	0,000
Yes	177	-0,230	-3,132	0,002
No	230	-0,380	-6,208	0,000

Table 6. Differences in the results of life satisfaction by gender / the whole group / (U Mann-Whitney Test)

	Z	p level
SWLS	-2,777	0,005

women and men who did not belong to a religious community was noted in the assessment of the sources of experienced stress due to relationships with peers / colleagues. A higher stress index in relationships with peers or colleagues was noted in the group of women who did not belong to a religious community, and its result was 1.61 (Table 4).

The results of life satisfaction remained in a statistically significant negative and moderate correlation ($p < 0.05$) with the results of the level of experienced stress both in the group as a whole and in the group not belonging to the religious community, and to a lesser extent in the group belonging to the religious community (Table 5).

There were statistically significant differences between men and women in terms of life satisfaction (Table 6). A higher level of satisfaction in all SWLS items was recorded in the group of men. This was noted in the group of men belonging to and not belonging to religious communities.

A comparison of groups belonging to and not belonging to religious communities in terms of life satisfaction shows statistically significant differences ($Z = 3.173, p < 0.05$). A higher level of satisfaction with life was recorded for people belonging to religious communities.

Discussion of the results

The level of stress in the group of people belonging to and not belonging to religious communities reaches a similar value, these groups do not differ in terms of the level of experienced stress, and there are also no differences between different types of community groups. This shows that both religiously engaged and disengaged people are exposed to crisis experiences. Struggling with stress, the level of which we can estimate as moderate and which occurs in various areas, is therefore the everyday life of all young people. The area of experienced stress, which is more intense in the group of people belonging to religious communities, is the area of “religion / spirituality”. Why in this area stress is higher in the group of people belonging to communities than in the group of people not involved in dialogue in religious communities? Religious commitment through participation in communities intensifies the use of religious stress coping strategies (Pilarska, Liberska, 2017), which means that religiosity becomes an essential element of life, and thus an area around which conflicts and fears also focus. Research among Jewish adolescents (Dubow, Pargament, Boxer, and Tarakeshwar, 1999) showed that over half of the respondents experienced stress related to religion (related to Shabbat-related restrictions or anti-Semitic attitudes). The time devoted to religious practice in the compared groups is different (people belonging to communities spend more than twice as much on it), which generates space for experiences that are not free from stress. Additionally, it should be remembered that belonging to religious communities is associated with fulfilling specific roles in them, often requiring leaving the so-called “comfort zone”, which is a form of challenge, but also stress. The study did not distinguish eustress and distress (cf. Ogińska-Bulik, 2009) as different variants of stress, and such a specification in this area seems to be important and could describe the stress of community members, which is associated, for example, with public speaking. There are gender differences in the strength and sources of experienced stress. Women and girls report a higher level of experienced stress in all studied groups. Previous studies indicated a greater incidence of depression in women

(cf. Marczak, 2011; Pilarska, 2011; Wojciszke, 2012), which may be its consequence. It is worth referring to the problem of female masochism (Horney, 2012). K. Horney claims that the problem of masochism in our cultural circle is encountered more often in women than in men, and its causes should be seen in the anatomical differences between the sexes and in how they are interpreted from the perspective of psychoanalytic theories, which is discussed by the author of the theory. Gender differences can also be explained in other ways, including social learning theories or gender schema theories (Brannon, 2002). It is noted that to some extent the socialization of girls and boys is culturally diverse, although gender differences are better described by evolutionist explanations (Wojciszke, 2012). At this point, it is necessary to reflect on the role of prehistoric women and prehistoric men. Women have always been involved in giving birth to children, bringing them up and caring for the welfare of their loved ones. Therefore, it is not surprising that among people who do not belong to religious communities, women and girls considerably more often perceive relationships with their peers and colleagues as a source of experienced stress. How girls and women experience relationships with their peers is important. Women tend to confide in other women, especially their relatives, they focus on emotions and social relations (Wojciszke, 2012). They are seen as more sensitive, critical, but also observational, they attach great importance to their appearance and body (Richters, Grulich, de Visser, Smith, Rissel, 2003). However, what is interesting is the fact that the declaration of a higher level of stress in the area of interpersonal relations occurs only among girls and women who do not belong to religious communities. This can be explained by the fact that belonging to religious communities, in a way, places women and girls more in their roles and facilitates functioning in peer relations through constant dialogue with other members of the community. In the entire sample and in the group of people belonging to a religious community, men and boys statistically more often perceive the political situation and relations with their neighbours as sources of experienced stress. Compared to men, women are less interested in politics, follow current events less frequently and

are more pessimistic about their ability to influence politics (Wolak, 2020). Therefore, less interest in women may result in a lower level of stress in this area. The higher level of stress manifested among men in relation to their neighbours may correspond to the stereotypical attribution of competitive tendencies to men (Brannon, 2002), but also to a higher level of aggression in men (Wojciszke, 2012). On the other hand, how is the higher level of stress in boys to be explained, within the relationship with teachers and employers, in the group of boys and men belonging to religious communities? It should be remembered that the surveyed boys and men belonging to religious communities have on average over 6 years of involvement in community dialogue in their lives, and this is a statistically significant difference in relation to girls and women in those groups whose average duration of membership in communities is less than 5 years. Better role placement may cause a more conflicting relationship with widely understood authorities, which is natural and even necessary in preparation for adult life, adult roles and new tasks (Oleszkowicz, Senejko, 2015; Ziółkowska, 2015). On the other hand, the study of life satisfaction shows that it reaches a higher level in the group of boys and men and that it negatively correlates with the level of experienced stress. This sheds new light on the results for men and women, in which there are no significant differences in the context of experienced happiness (Wojciszke, 2012). A higher level of satisfaction with life (despite a similar level of experienced stress) is also indicated by members of religious communities compared to people who are not religiously involved, which indicates a constructive coping with stress (Pilarska, Liberska, 2017). Despite the fact that the analyzes prove that the dimensions of religiosity are subjectively related to subjective well-being and that they buffer the influence of professional demands on depression symptoms, it cannot be stated that the dimensions of religiosity have a buffering effect on satisfaction with life and work (Lechner, Tomasik, Silbereisen, Wasilewski, 2013). This area requires further analysis.

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