The Contemporary Theological Project

The Interconnectedness Between the Wellbeing of Undergraduate Students of Religion Studies and the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors that support the wellbeing of undergraduate students in religion studies and religion at a large public university in South Africa. An ethnomethodological, interpretive research design was adopted to explore the intricacies between students' wellbeing and the environment within which they pursue their academic aspirations in religion studies. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews (n=20) and two focus group discussions (n=8). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and verified independently. The data were then analysed by means of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA provides an avenue for detailed examinations of personal lived experiences. Two unique themes emerged from the analysis, namely, that the wellbeing of the religion studies students in the study was supported by i) the pre-existing theoretical content of their theological studies, and ii) the quality of the academic relationship with their lecturers. This reconnaissance of the terrain of the lived experiences and wellbeing of religion studies students indicated the distinct nature of the constellations of wellbeing for students of religion studies, the entrenched symbiosis between curricula, the paradigms underpinning the curricula, and the role of lecturers in student wellbeing.

Introduction

Wellbeing is a concept with high levels of specificity at the definitional level and broad applicability in various domains of subjective human experiences. It has grown significantly as a psychological construct and has not only been accepted in the interdisciplinary sphere but has also been applied and examined in diverse groups of people. More recently, specific scientific interest in the wellbeing of higher

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education students has also increased. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] Wellbeing issues frequently highlighted are professional development, professional identity, and personal behaviour, as encountered by relatively young individuals most of whom left secondary school a short while ago. Undergraduate students find themselves in distinct situations of transition where they need to develop skills sets of increased personal responsibility, even as they expand their future ability to enter the world of work.

The efficacy of spirituality and religious coping strategies during times of adversity and periods of stress and adjustment has been widely acknowledged in scientific research.[6] [7] For instance, Swanepoel, Esterhuyse, Beukes, and Nortjé[8] found a significant positive relationship between dysfunctional coping and depression in a study on ministers of religion in South Africa. In their study, dysfunctional coping was identified as "a mediator in the relationship between personal spiritual well-being and depression". The need to teach wellbeing to undergraduate students and, more specifically, to students of religion studies, was thus emphasised.[9] These studies [8] [9] point to the benefits of teaching health promotion broadly (and effective coping strategies specifically) to religion studies students while they are at university. They also recommend the integration of these issues into the professional training of pastors and ministers. The focus of the studies is however predominantly on the future roles of religion studies students, rather than on their own personal and subjective wellbeing during their years of study.

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1 Ashton, Julian, 2020. "Guest editorial", Journal of Public Mental Health, Vol.19 (No.1) : 5-7

2 Henning, M., C. Krägeloh, Rachel Dryer, Fiona Moir, R. Billington, and A. Hill. (Eds.). 2018. "Wellbeing in Higher Education: Cultivating a Healthy Lifestyle Among Faculty and Students." In *Wellbeing in Higher Education*.Routledge, London.

3 Jones, Emma, Michael Priestley, Liz Brewster, Susan J. Wilbraham, Gareth Hughes, and Leigh Spanner. "Student wellbeing and assessment in higher education: the balancing act." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 46(no.3) (2021) : 438-450

4 Braidman, I., Regan, M., & Humphreys, J. (2018). "Personal and professional development." In Henning, M, C. Krägeloh, Rachel Dryer, Fiona Moir, R. Billington, and A. Hill (Eds) , *Wellbeing in Higher Education*.London: Routledge.

5 Colby, Lauren, Moliehi Mareka, She'neze Pillay, Fatima Sallie, Christine van Staden, Edwin D. du Plessis, & Gina Joubert. "The association between the levels of burnout and quality of life among fourth-year medical students at the University of the Free State." *South African Journal of Psychiatry* [Online], 24 (2018) : 6 pages.

6 Han, Nae Chang, and Christian U. Krägeloh. "3 Spirituality and religiousness." *Wellbeing in Higher Education: Cultivating a Healthy Lifestyle Among Faculty and Students* (2018) : 29-29

7 Schnell, Tatjana. "The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to Demographics and Well-being." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4(no.6) (2009) : 483-499

8 Swanepoel, Philé, Karel GF . Esterhuyse, Roelf Beukes, & Nico Nortjé. "Die Rol van coping in die Verband Tussen Geestelike Welstand en Depressie by Predikante." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* [Online], 68 (2012): 9 pages.

9 Voltmer, Edgar, Christine Thomas, and Claudia Spahn. "Psychosocial Health and Spirituality of Theology Students and Pastors of the German Seventh-Day Adventist Church." *Review of Religious Research* (2011): 29-45.

Since it may be argued that many students of theology and religion studies will become the spiritual and pastoral leaders in the communities they will serve in during their lifetimes, the skill of developing and sustaining their own wellbeing will be critical in their future roles. In this regard, Louw[10] has developed a conceptual grid on seeing the 'bigger picture of life' for students of religion. In this grid, the ontology of life is coupled with an existential analysis of the structure of being in order to make a pastoral diagnosis regarding the different dimensions of 'life'. He argues that "seeing the bigger picture in a pastoral hermeneutics of life, contributes to spiritual healing (cura vitae)".[8] Similarly, Chiroma and Cloete[11] conclude that "theological training supported by effective mentoring can contribute to the shaping of theology students in terms of their spiritual growth, character development and ministry formation". They further concur with the recommendation that mentoring, for instance, should be used as a pedagogical strategy and constructed as an essential element of undergraduate theological education, thereby prioritising the wellbeing of these students along with their academic development. While mentoring may not focus on wellbeing explicitly, the insertion of mentoring in theological education does acknowledge that learning is more than the mere transfer of information – it is seen rather as "the establishment of a modelling or mentoring relationship that takes place within a theological community".[8] Echoing these sentiments, a study on spiritual autobiographies conducted in Australia[12] also contended that theological curricula should invest more in the spiritual guidance and formation of religion studies students at the personal level. A study on physical health, mental health, and subjective wellbeing conducted in Germany[13] showed that differentiation, elaboration, and coherence measures correlated with health and wellbeing and predicted life satisfaction in two groups of students, namely science students and religion studies students (within the Christian faith). The religion studies students, however, presented more differentiated, elaborated, and coherent personal meaning systems than the science students in this sample. This finding was confirmed in a sample of Muslim university students[14] that showed that while religiosity correlates positively with numerous indices of mental health, such as psychological wellbeing,

10 Louw, Daniël J. "Pastoral Caregiving as Life Science: Towards an Existential Hermeneutics of Life within the Interplay between Pastoral Healing (Cura Vitae) and Spiritual Wholeness". *In die Skriflig/ In Luce Verbi*, (2017 : 51(1): 1-9

11 Chiroma, Nathan H., and Anita Cloete. "Mentoring as a Supportive Pedagogy in Theological Training." *HTS: Theological Studies* 71, no.3(2015) : 1-8

12 Erwich, René. "Studying theology: Between Exploration and Commitment – Researching spiritual development of Higher Education Students of Theology." *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 22, no.3(2018 : 214 223.

13 Pöl mann, Karin, Barbara Gruss, and Peter Joraschky. "Structural properties of personal meaning systems: a new approach to measuring meaning of life." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 1, no. 3 (20 : 19 117

14 Gardner, Timothy M, Christian U. Krägeloh, and Marcus A. Henning. "Religious coping, stress, and qa lity of life of Muslim university students in New Zealand." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17no.4(2014 : 37 8

stress management, and quality of life, there may also be differences within groups. The study by Gardner et al.[11] revealed that "international Muslim students had higher levels of spirituality/religiousness than domestic Muslim students and used more positive and negative religious coping methods". It seems then that the wellbeing and meaning-making of students in religion studies may be distinct from that of other groups of undergraduate students and may potentially even differ within the broad group itself. In the context of the current article, the terms 'spirituality' and 'religiosity' are both used. Del Rio and White[15] distinguish between these two concepts by referring to religiosity as a community and convention of belief and ritual, and to spirituality as human individuality and making sense of one's life. Where religiosity defines how a person behaves based on various established belief systems within given milieus, spirituality seems to be available to individuals of different cultures and different generations.

Besides the critical role that the wellbeing of religion studies students plays in their development and successful management of future roles, some studies also highlight academic motivation as an important factor that affects the psychological wellbeing of these students.[16] It seems that academic motivation, and perhaps subsequent achievement, may be connected to student wellbeing.

In support of the above findings, the current study was conducted to explore the subjective wellbeing of students of religion studies in a South African context. The tertiary sector in South Africa is dynamic, and the scientific field of theology and religion studies is particularly vibrant. Yet the paucity of studies on religion studies student wellbeing in an African context is apparent. Within these parameters, an investigation was conducted to explore and understand the factors that support the wellbeing of undergraduate students in religion studies.

Background to the Study

South Africa has now seen more than 25 years of democracy, and public universities have played a pivotal role in addressing past inequalities. Redressing injustices of the past has been central to the strategic planning at all public universities. During this time, the number of faculties of theology countrywide has been reduced from eleven[17] to the current four – at the University of Pretoria (UP), the University of the Free State, Stellenbosch University, and the North West University. Undergraduate

15 Del Rio, Carlos M., and Lyle J. White. "Separating spirituality from religiosity: A hylomorphic attitudinal perspective." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4 (2012): 122-32.

16 Özcan, Zeynep, and Faruk Karaca. "A study on relationship between academic motivation and psychological well-being in students of theology faculty." *İlahiyat Tetkikleri Dergisi* 50 (2018): 31-43.

17 Buitendag, Johan. "'The idea of the University' and the 'Pretoria Model' Apologia pro statu Facultatis Theologicae Universitatis Pretoriensis ad secundum saeculum." *HTS: Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 1-7

student numbers in religion studies at the University of Pretoria (where this study was conducted) have grown over the past seven years from 213 students in 2016 to 460 students in 2020 and 489 in 2021; and with a slight decline to 440 students in 2022. [18] [19] The Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria is the oldest and largest in South Africa. Its origins and development are richly textured. The faculty originated in 1917 when the Presbyterian Church and the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa ('Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk in Afrika' or NHKA) embarked on the training of their ministers at the University of Pretoria (although the Presbyterian Church never sent any students to Pretoria). In the 1920s the Presbyterian Church withdrew from the faculty, and in 1979 the Transvaal version of the Dutch Reformed Church ('Nederduitse Hervormde of Gereformeerde Kerk'), which later merged with the Church of the Cape to become the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika in 1997 joined the faculty. However, it was constituted as a separate section in the Faculty of Theology. Until 1999 the Faculty of Theology at UP had two completely independent sections, known as A and B. These two sections merged on 1 January 2000 with the faculty becoming a multi-ecclesial faculty comprising the two traditional partners. The Uniting Presbyterian Church (UPCSA) joined the faculty in 2020, and the latest partner is the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA), which joined in 2022.[20] In the context of this study, we refer to the sample group as students of religion studies, which includes students enrolled in the Faculty of Theology and Religion pursuing theological studies. Our terminology is guided by the faculty's vision of "expanding the scope of academic engagement"[21] in a bid to be more inclusive. We are further cognisant of the differentiation between the terms 'seminary' and 'faculty'. At the time of this study the Faculty of Theology and Religion was defined as a faculty and is treated as such in this article.[22] [23] [24]

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Opportunities for the wellbeing, educational progress, and moral development of

18 University of Pretoria." Institutional Research and Analytics" 12 February 2020

19 University of Pretoria." Institutional Research and Analytics" 6 September 2022.

20 University of Pretoria. "Faculty of Theology and Religion History" 11 March 2022. https://www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-theology-and-religion/article/3038/history.

21 Beyers, Jaco, "Scriptural reasoning: An expression of what it means to be a Faculty of Theology and Religion", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (2018) 74 (4), 5040

22 Buitendag, Johan. "What is so theological about a faculty of theology at a public university? Athens–Berlin–Pretoria", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (2019) 75(4), a5548

23 Buitendag, Johan. "Some reflections on the genealogy of the 'Pretoria model': Towards a definition of theological education at a public university." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* [Online], 75(3) 2019 : 7pages.

24 Buitendag, Johan. "Between the Scylla and the Charybdis: Theological education in the 21st century in Africa." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* [Online], 70(4) 2014 : 5 pages.

students are universally desired.[25]. The term 'positive education'[26] refers to education for traditional skills as well as happiness. This approach to education provides a remedy for the crisis many higher education institutions seem to be facing, including high rates of depression and anxiety among students.[27] Positive education also contributes to increased life satisfaction, promotes learning, and enhances social cohesion.[28] It further benefits students by leading them to greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence at a time in their lives when they are approaching adulthood and when development in these areas is crucial. A multidimensional approach to wellbeing moves beyond an elementary positive-negative dichotomy and regards wellbeing rather as a profile of indicators across multiple domains.[19] [29] In this study, the term wellbeing is considered through the framework of the PERMA model.[17] This model proposes five distinct dimensions of wellbeing that are pursued for their own sake: *Positive emotions* (hedonic feelings of happiness); *Engagement* (positive psychological connections, feeling absorbed and engaged in life); *Relationships* (supportive and appreciative interactions with friends, family members, professional colleagues, and other individuals); *Meaning* (having a sense of purpose and feeling connected to something greater than oneself); and *Accomplishment* (making progress towards a goal and having mastery in one's life). All these dimensions form the acronym PERMA. The PERMA model has been used to measure student wellbeing[27] and has been shown to constitute subjective wellbeing[25] in various populations. It has also been connected to an array of character strengths.[28] Several cross-cultural comparisons of the PERMA model of wellbeing have also been established.[24]

Ethnomethodological, Interpretive Research on Student Wellbeing

Against this background, a qualitative study was conducted to explore and understand the factors that support the wellbeing of undergraduate students in religion studies. Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were used as data collection strategies.

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25 Khaw, Daniel, and Margaret Kern. "A cross-cultural comparison of the PERMA model of well-being." *Undergraduate Journal of Psychology at Berkeley*, University of California 8no.1 (2014 : 10 23

26 Seligman, Martin. "PERMA and the building blocks of well-being." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 13no .4(2018 : 3 3.

27 Moeller, Robert W, and Martin Seehuus. "Loneliness as a mediator for college students' social skills and experiences of depression and anxiety." *Journal of Adolescence* 7(2019 : 1-13

28 Kern, Margaret L, Lea E. Waters, Alejandro Adler, and Mathew A. White. "A multidimensional approach to measuring well-being in students: Application of the PERMA framework." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 10no.3(2015) : 28- 27.

29 Wagner, Lisa, Fabian Gander, René T. Proyer, and Willibald Ruch. "Character strengths and PERMA: Investigating the Relationships of Character Strengths with a Multidimensional Framework of Well-being." *Applied Research in Quality of* Life 15, no.2 (2020 : 7 38

The face-to-face interviews with undergraduate students in theology (n=20) were conducted by student fieldworkers from the helping professions in several 4-hour time blocks during the first semester of the academic year. Fieldworkers approached students on campus, provided a brief explanation of the study, and asked them whether they would be interested in participating in the study. Those who indicated their willingness were requested to complete a short biographic form and to give their consent. Then they were asked one question: *What contributes to your wellbeing as a student at the University of Pretoria?* The responses were captured in paper format and then sealed in a paper envelope. All the responses from the written questionnaires were subsequently captured in electronic format by a separate team of data capturers. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to pursue authentic 'first' responses. Follow-up questions were kept to a minimum and related only to the responses provided by the participants. No restrictions were placed on the length of response times. The participants could respond in depth or briefly, according to their own choosing. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, two focus group discussions were held with eight (n=8) students in religion studies. The discussions with the first focus group lasted 01:27:38 and 1:37:43 with the second focus group. The focus group questions were structured using the PERMA framework as the theoretical framework for the study.[17] The framework covers positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement as central constructs of wellbeing. The focus groups were facilitated by an experienced researcher with a background in educational psychology. In contrast to the brief and concise personal interviews, the focus group discussions were conducted in depth with no time restriction on the discussions. This provided an opportunity to gain multi-layered responses on student wellbeing that went beyond the initial responses to questions about wellbeing. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. The study thus generated two data sets: one data set on the face-to-face interviews and another data set on the transcribed focus group discussions.

The study was conducted on the Hatfield campus of the University of Pretoria. The face-to-face interviews were held during the day when regular lectures were in progress. The participants were interviewed in open spaces outside lecture halls. The focus group discussions were conducted indoors on campus. Focus group questions included the following: "Who constitutes the social support that contributes to wellbeing?", "What are the most important relationships in your life?", and "How important is accomplishment (in your studies) to your wellbeing?"

Participants

At the time of data collection, all the participants were undergraduate theology students at the University of Pretoria. The biographical details of the participants in the face-to-face interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Characteristics of the face-to-face interview participants (N = 20)*

Characteristic	Freqe ncy	(%)	Characteristic	Freqe ncy	(%)
Gender*			**Ag**		
Male	11	55	17		
Female	9	45	18	2	10
La g g			19	2	10
Afrikaans	6	30	20	7	35
English	2	10	21	1	5
IsiNdebele	1	5	22	3	15
IsiXhosa	2	10	23	1	5
IsiZulu	2	10	24		
Northern Sotho	1	5	25		
Sesotho	1	5	26		
Setswana (Tswana)	2	10	27		
SiSwati			28	1	5
Tshivenda (Venda)			29	3	15
Xitsonga (Tsonga)	*3*	15			
			P r o v i n c e o f O r i g n		
Citizenship			Eastern Cape	1	5
SA citizen	19	95	Free State		
SADC country	1	5	Gauteng	8	40
Ethnicity			KwaZulu-Natal		
African	12	60	Limpopo	3	15
White	7	35	Mpumalanga	4	20
Coloured*	1	5	North West	1	5
			Northern Cape	1	5
			Western Cape	1	5
			SADC	1	5

* The study acknowledged a gender continuum. The participants could identify as male or female or provide a descriptor. All the participants identified as either male or female.

** The study acknowledged race as a social construction. The comprehensive study however required biographical data that included race for the purposes of long-term planning and optimal student support.

The biographical details of the focus group participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Characteristics of the focus group participants (N = 8)*

Characteristic	Frequency	(%)	Characteristic	Frequency	(%)
Gender*			**Age**		
Male	3	37,5	17		
Female	5	62,5	18		
Language			19	1	12,5
Afrikaans	1	12,5	20	2	25
English			21		
IsiNdebele			22	2	25
IsiXhosa	1	12,5	23	1	12,5
IsiZulu			24		
Northern Sotho	3	37,5	25		
Sesotho			26		
Setswana (Tswana)	2	25	27		
SiSwati			28		
Tshivenda (Venda)	1	12,5	29	2	25
Xitsonga (Tsonga)					
Citizenship			**Province of Origin**		
SA citizen			Eastern Cape	1	12,5
SADC country	7	87,5	Free State		
	1	12,5	Gauteng	3	37,5
Ethnicity			KwaZulu-Natal	1	12,5
African	7	87,5	Limpopo	2	25
White	1	12,5	Mpumalanga		
			North West		
			Northern Cape		

			Western Cape		
			SADC	n/a	125

* The study acknowledged a gender continuum. The participants could identify as male or female or provide a descriptor. All the participants identified as either male or female.

The participation of all the religion studies students in this study was voluntary. As described earlier, the students were provided with a short overview of the project and invited to participate in either the face-to-face interviews or the focus group discussions. The students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage during the data collection. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw their contributions within a week after their participation. No students withdrew from the study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has grown rapidly in the last two decades,[30] [31] is used in a variety of research settings, and serves as a useful method to "study lived experience with particular interest in the meaning-making processes involved in understanding individual experiences within certain contexts".[32] The data from the interviews and the first focus group were evocative, prompting the need for a second focus group. The use of a second focus group aligns with the 'double hermeneutic'[33] of researchers' making meaning, and then also with the making meaning of the meaning-making of the participants. It is also aligned with the use of IPA as a method for data analysis in this study. The second focus group thus supported IPA and provided an opportunity to expand the contextual and temporal understanding of the wellbeing of these religion studies students.

The data segments were numbered for the focus groups – this provided anonymity for the responses from the smaller groups, allowing the responses to be captured and presented without fear of disclosure. The interview data, in turn, were connected to the biographical data of the participants, but here anonymity was protected by separating the identifying details from the paper-based format from those of the electronic format during the creation of the interview transcripts – with only the biographical data captured electronically.

30 Shaw, Rachel, Amy Burton, Christian Borg Xuereb, Jonathan Gibson, and Deirdre Lane. "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Applied Health Research." SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2014.

31 Smith, Jonathan A. "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Reply to Amedeo Giorgi." *Existential Analysis* 21, no.2 (2010): 186–191.

32 Holland, Fiona. "Teaching in Higher Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis." SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2014.

33 Hepburn, Ronald W." Being and Time." (1963): 256–278.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity were ensured by implementing several of the strategies described by Smith et al.[23] when using IPA: the intentional development of a dialogue between the principal investigator of the study and the researcher conducting the focus groups; line-by-line analysis of the full transcripts of the data set by two experienced researchers; the identification of emergent themes from the data, instituting two stages of data analysis, noting both convergences and divergences within each of the data sets, and across data sets; creating an interpretative account of the wellbeing of undergraduate religion studies students; the development of dominant themes; the organisation of the data in a way that illustrates the findings, but which is still fully traceable to the raw data; using the researcher-to-researcher dialogical space to assess the plausibility of the emerging findings; and the development of a text that presents the key findings to readers.

The findings are presented here in a semi-narrative format with the purpose of creating nuanced understandings of the wellbeing of the undergraduate students of religion studies. The study foregrounded individual interpretations of wellbeing, and then wove a collective narrative of wellbeing.

Findings

As stated earlier, two dominant themes emerged from this study. The students identified the following factors as contributing to their wellbeing: i) the pre-existing theoretical content of their theological and religion studies, and ii) the role of their lecturers in their wellbeing, that is, the quality of the academic relationship with their lecturers and other staff members at the university.

The pre-existing theoretical content of theological and religion studies and student wellbeing

The above themes are illustrated by the extracts from the raw data presented here.

"… that (theology studies) was very like influential to me and how I look at things on a daily life now" (Focus group 1, data segment 14) .

"I will say the course … theology ... it's a good course you know cause like I also ... I came here not planning to be at theology but then you know after getting to know theology as a whole I was like okay I need to finish this degree course for my wellbeing like … I rate it for you know like I give it hundred percent cause you know you learn a whole lot of things which you didn't know, and you get to understand certain things, why they are done you know … like for instance like in my religion like or in my culture like I couldn't understand why like … do I have to like you know make a sacrifice like we now in the chapter of like we talking about sacrifices and all that so you get to understand why those things are being done so, ja, I feel like the

course on its own it's doing the most" (Focus group 1, data segment 19) .

"*How is the course and how to manage or handle the work. The library when it comes to finding the sources of the assignment*" (Interview 17 male, 18 years old, IsiZulu student).

"*. with regard to one of the modules in theology, there are some pr ts where we focus on sexuality and you'll find it is very interesting and challenging so the course you see some of the things we are discussing … we never discuss, we don't discuss these things in church … we just hide them so and when you come here you come here having that … negative … knowledge of these things but when you come here then we unpc k these things and we come to understand in a very different way you see*" (Focus group 1, data segment 12) .

The students seemed to value the personal development they experienced from their theological studies and the critical discourse they embarked on. In addition to the theology study itself, personal spirituality was also closely related to their wellbeing:

"*… fact that I freqe ntly talk to God … and esp cially when I've been having a tough week, I can sit for half an hour and talking to him, not being in tears at the end of it, and I'd feel really good afterwards and then I go to bed and then I just ps s out from tiredness*" (Focus group 2, data segment 28) . This is echoed by another student: "*… for me I realise when I sp nt time away from God then my relationship with God just affects everything, ja, it just, you lose balance … sp ritual it's … more impr tant you know*" (Focus group 1, data segment 3) .

The role of the lecturers in the wellbeing of the students in religion studies

The data further suggest that the participants in the study perceived their academic relationship with their lecturers in the faculty as contributing towards their wellbeing:

"*. why I started to love theology because she (the lecturer) insp red me ... I will even text her, can you p ease help and then she'll help ... whenever I say can you please help, she's there like to help*" (Focus group 1, data segment 174).

Another participant seemed to share this sentiment:

"… the one sp cific lecturer... one day I was having a dip in my dep ession and he realised that something is off because I'm not really laughing at his jokes … he loves to tell jokes though they are so stupid actually, and he realised I'm not really laughing … I'm laughing sometime but you know I just give him this half blank stare, and he realised you know something's off, and he asked me are you tired and I'm like … sort of you know and he's like is it time for life you know and I said … a bit and he was actually really nice to me through the rest of the class, and I mean he did try to tease me and to get me to laugh but he wasn't, you know, hard on me or anything for not answering a qe stion

correctly or anything … another lecturer I know actually really well actually personally … because he gives me Greek, and he's my reverend at church and he noticed in that same p riod of time that I'm not as well as I've always been because you know … like a spring in my step it's time for … [audio unclear] *and you know he did talk to me about it, and he said you know I need to take care of myself and everything and, ja, most of our lecturers here at the faculty are he nomenal p oh e cause they had to work in churches themselves at one pi nt and they know how to …* [audio unclear] *p oh e, and it's great"* (Focus group 2, data segment 88).

According to another participant: "*… we really do have lecturers who really go beyond their p ofession they become more than just lecturers, they become our models. For example, I had a lecturer in the first semester who like I had mentioned before that I have a p oblem with my Wi-Fi … I had watched a certain video so I really was I think not in a good spc e for like two months, and I had her classes for three months, so she noticed change … you are no longer the way you were a week ago, so what is wrong, and I said no I'm fine then I exh ained and not just talking ... it really affected me so, so she went beyond just being a lecturer, she literally ap oached me outside and she was like I realised that you just are not yourself*" (Focus group 2, data segment 90).

This same participant went on to say: "*… so and we do have lecturers like there's this other lecturer who just is so welcoming … I don't know like I feel like he takes us he looks at us and he sees his children, he really, he even invites you to his office like not to ask … about an assignment or just to come and sit and have coffee and just talk and joke around, so I feel like there are lecturers who really do go beyond their duties"* (Focus group 2, data segment 90). This sentiment was echoed by another student: "*… a good p rsonnel that would help you whenever you ask for help and a good supr t system whenever you have p oblems*" (Interview 15, male, 19 ye ars old, Afrikaans student).

Apart from the connection with the lecturers, the students also mentioned that relationships in the broad sense were an important source of wellbeing for them:

"*My relationship with others, that's just one of the things that contribute a whole lot to my wellbeing"* (Focus group 1, data segment 2).

"*The fact that the university is so diverse really makes my exp rience at university ps itive. Meeting new p oh e and making connection with p oh e from different backgrounds is excellent, and it encourages a ps itive vibe at the university which adds to the ps itive vibe on camp s*" (Interview 12, female, 20 ye ars old, English student).

"*Having good, healthy relationships on campus*" (Interview 20, female, 19 years old, Setswana student).

For some of the students, it seemed that it was both being part of the community of theology students, *as well as* having the support of staff members at the university, that supported their wellbeing:

"The Wi-Fi, student support system, the restaurants, house theology, faculty advisor" (Interview 18, male, 20 years old, IsiXhosa student).

Discussion

This study suggests an intricate symbiosis between the wellbeing of the undergraduate students in religion studies, the curricula of their religion studies, and the lecturers and staff who presented the curricula. These two findings, namely the close relationship between theological course content and student wellbeing, as well as the role of lecturers in supporting undergraduate religion studies student wellbeing, call for further investigation into wellbeing in religion studies student populations.

Different from the curricula of many other undergraduate degrees, the curricula of religion studies lie close to personal wellbeing. They are deeply embedded in the study context of the students and are intimately connected to their inner life worlds.

The study was conducted in an African context where demands on lecturers have increased dramatically in line with the increase in access to tertiary education in recent years. It was also conducted at a time when student support was often viewed as something *external to* the formal academic programme of students. The findings of this idiographic study point to a more general nomothetical need for deeper reflection on the dynamics between course curricula in religion studies, the role of lecturers, and undergraduate student wellbeing.

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the factors that support the wellbeing of undergraduate religion studies students in a higher education context in Africa. The study found that the students regarded their theological studies *per se* as a source of wellbeing. They seemed to find meaning and understanding through their studies and valued the fact that their studies challenged how they saw the world. In a related study on what motivates religion studies students, Litmanen et al.[34] found that in the field of theology, the motivation of students is closely connected to their spiritual conviction and values. Similarly, a study by Erwich[9] found that 80% of theology students display strong motivation when entering their studies. This motivation is often based on a spiritual experience, which in turn can be linked to subjective wellbeing. In the same way, a study by Özcan and Karaca[12] found a significant positive correlation between theology students' academic motivation and psychological wellbeing. This

34 Litmanen, Topi, Laura Hirsto, and Kirsti Lonka. "Personal Goals and Academic Achievement Among Theology Students." *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no.2 (2008): 159-180.

implies that students who are academically motivated, inadvertently also support their own psychological wellbeing. Enjoyment of studies has also been linked to positive self-evaluations of competence, task-related goals, and interest in academic tasks.[35] This aligns with Henrico's[36] recommendation that self-coaching, appreciative coaching, and self-management principles should be combined to facilitate wellbeing for higher education students broadly.

The natural symbiosis between the content of the curricula in theological studies and the subjective wellbeing of students who are engaging with the programme content may therefore potentially be leveraged when student support interventions are planned and developed. The students in this study were already leveraging the course content and religion studies curriculum to support their wellbeing. By foregrounding this unique aspect of undergraduate studies in religion studies, student support may be optimised even further. A number of studies have already described the positive effects of religiosity and spirituality on personal wellbeing.[37] [38] In their study on the psychosocial health of religion studies students, Voltmer et al.[7] found that spirituality was a vital component of their health and wellbeing. A study by Gardner et al.[11] too suggested a positive correlation between religion and spirituality and also a positive correlation between psychological health and social quality of life. Findings from a study by Hansen, Buitendach, and Kanengoni[39] on educators revealed statistically significant relationships between psychological capital (read: self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience), subjective wellbeing, burnout, and job satisfaction, where psychological capital significantly mediated the relationship between subjective wellbeing and burnout. This study confirmed the ability of these potential levers to support student wellbeing in an African context too.

Apart from the theological curricula, the students in this study indicated lecturers and other staff members as critical sources of support for their wellbeing. The data suggest that in general students value a connection with their lecturers. This is not 'new'. A study by Bergin and Bergin[40] linked secure attachment to teachers with greater emotional regulation and social competence. The findings of this study re-iterate

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35 Pekrun, Reinhard, and Elizabeth J. Stephens. "Achievement Emotions in Higher Education." In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, pp.257–306. Springer, Dordrecht, 2010.

36 Henrico, Karien. "Sustaining Student Wellness in Higher Educational Institutions: Possible Design Principles and Implementations Strategies." *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 18, no.1 (2022): 1-9.

37 Eckersley, Richard M. "Culture, Spirituality, Religion and Health: Looking at the Big Picture." *Medical Journal of Australia* 186 (2007): S54–S56.

38 Wilkins, Victoria Marie. "Religion, Spirituality, and Psychological Distress in Cardiovascular Disease." Drexel University, 2010.

39 Hansen, Andrea, Johanna H. Buitendach, & Herbert Kanengoni. "Psychological Capital, Subjective Well-Being, Burnout and Job Satisfaction Amongst Educators in the Umlazi region in South Africa." *SA Journal of Human Resource Management [Online]*, 13 (2015): 9 pages.

40 Bergin, Christi, and David Bergin. "Attachment in the Classroom." *Educational Psychology Review* 21, no.2 (2009): 141–170.

and support these findings. The symbiosis between the role of lecturers and student wellbeing extends to germane aspects of student wellbeing such as positive emotions. Rowe, Fitness, and Wood[41] found that students' positive emotions (particularly interest/excitement and love) with regard to learning are associated with genuinely engaged teaching staff. In the same vein, research by Palmer et al.[42] found that a connection with lecturers can increase student retention as students are likely to stay longer at university if they develop a sense of belonging through connectedness. Various other studies[43] [44] [45] [46] [47] [48] [49] [50] link positive relationships between lecturers and students to aspects of student wellbeing such as commitment, effort, motivation, satisfaction, and engagement.

This study suggests that the intricate connection between the religion studies curriculum, the lecturers that present it, and the subjective wellbeing of undergraduate religion studies students warrants further investigation.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study include the brevity of the face-to-face interviews and the fact that data were collected at only one tertiary institution. However, this is countered by the embedded nature of the broad study and the in-depth nature of the focus group discussions. Because the individual and focus group interviews were all conducted in

41 Rowe, Anna D., Julie Fitness, and Leigh N. Wood. "The role and functionality of emotions in feedback at university: A qualitative study." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2014): 283-309.

42 Palmer, Mark, Paula O'Kane, and Martin Owens. "Betwixt Spaces: Student Accounts of Turning Point Experiences in the First-Year Transition." *Studies in Higher Education* 34, no.1 (2009): 37-54.

43 Eloff, Irma. "College Students' Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Exploratory Study." *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 31, no.3 (2021): 254-260.

44 Strauss, Linda C, and J. Fredericks Volkwein. "Predictors of Student Commitment at Two-year and Four-year Institutions." *The Journal of Higher Education* 75, no.2 (2004): 203-227.

45 Lundberg, Carol A, and Laurie A. Schreiner. "Quality and Frequency of Faculty-Student Interaction as Predictors of Learning: An Analysis by Student Race/Ethnicity." *Journal of College Student Development* 45, no.5 (2004): 549-565.

46 Rugutt, John, and Caroline C. Chemosit. "What Motivates Students to Learn? Contribution of Student-To-Student Relations, Student-Faculty Interaction and Critical Thinking Skills." *Educational Research Quarterly* 32, no.3 (2009): 16.

47 Zepke, Nick, and Linda Leach. "Beyond Hard Outcomes: 'Soft' Outcomes and Engagement as Student Success." *Teaching in Higher Education* 15, no.6 (2010): 661-673.

48 Calvo, Rafael A., Lina Markauskaite, and Keith Trigwell. "Factors Affecting Students' Experiences and Satisfaction about Teaching Quality in Engineering." *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education* 16, no.2 (2010): 119-128.

49 Dobransky, Nicole D., and Ann Bainbridge Frymier. "Developing Teacher-Student Relationships Through Out of Class Communication." *Communication Quarterly* 52, no.3 (2004): 211-223.

50 Trigwell, Keith. "Teaching–Research Relations, Cross-Disciplinary Collegiality and Student Learning." *Higher Education* 49, no.3 (2005): 235-254.

English, the second language of most of the participants in the study, the finer nuances of the discussions on subjective wellbeing may not have been captured. The study did, however, set out to capture the main nuances and complexities of the wellbeing of the undergraduate students in religion studies and ample time was allowed for additional explanatory conversations. It purposely fully analysed the data for textures and sentiments that might have been be lost in generic content analysis and that relied more heavily on the frequency of specific word occurrences. All the interviews were conducted with sensitivity in respect of language, contextual, and other challenges.

Conclusion

This study provides a textured understanding of the wellbeing of undergraduate students of religion studies at a South African university. It underlines the fine balance between the learning environment and subjective student wellbeing and foregrounds the importance of the student-lecturer relationship. It also delineates the fine-grained symbiosis between course content and curricula in religion studies on the one hand and the ways in which students of religion studies support their own wellbeing on the other hand.

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