

The young adult's perception of religion and formal structures: A postmodern perspective

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The postmodern era has an impact on different dimensions of the contemporary young adult's social functioning which incorporates perceptions regarding religion and formal structures. This contemporary young adult refers to an individual between the ages of 18 and 25 years. Therefore the goal of this article was to report on research results regarding the perceptions of young adults on religion and formal structures. Within a mixed methods research approach, the exploratory mixed methods research design was utilised. Qualitative data was collected from 47 young adults by means of focus group interviewing. Quantitative data was collected from 1019 respondents utilising a questionnaire. Both groups were selected through the utilisation of purposive sampling. Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis, whilst a range of descriptive and inferential statistical procedures was used to analyse quantitative data. The findings indicated that the postmodern young adult displays a tendency to value conventional religious norms and practices, but the element of choice is of importance, as young adults seem to choose the aspects of religion that suit them. An increased interest in and a need for spirituality or a form of transcendence was found. Guidance by formal structures was favoured, but did not necessarily refer to 'church' or religious structures. The results illustrated that the contemporary young adult explores and experiments in terms of identity and lifestyle. Views and values seem to be person-specific and based on emotions and experiences with a tendency towards 'own authority' and an emphasis on the self. The rise of individualism which characterises the postmodern era has led to the creation of meaning by drawing on personal resources and on own personal moral beliefs and values.

Introduction

The postmodern era has an impact on different dimensions of the contemporary individual's social functioning, which incorporates perceptions regarding religion and formal structures. For the purpose of this article the focus will be on the perceptions of young adults who are individuals in transition from adolescence to adulthood, between the ages of 18 and 25 years (Arnett 2006:111), regarding religion and formal structures.

'In the broader sense of "modernity", the term "postmodernism" takes on its full meaning and signals a revisionary shift in the system of values and practices that were broadly codified in European life' (Craig 1998:587). Beyer, Du Preez and Eskell-Blokland (2007) refer to an emergence *beyond* modernism, both in contrast to and inclusive of modernism:

It arose in the twentieth century after the two world wars and the long Cold War, amidst a climate of disillusionment with the restrictions of the scientific claims of positivistic social scientists. (p. 38)

These authors state that postmodernism is regarded as a way of thinking and accepts not only facts, but also personal experiences and interpretations as real knowledge (Beyer *et al.* 2007:38).

Berzonsky (2005:126) refers to Rattansi and Phoenix, who postulate that postmodernity is characterised by 'an ever-accelerating rate of social, technological and economic change; instant media access; and global access to goods, people and ideas.' One also finds a never-ending 'demand for the consumption of nonessential products and goods that quickly become obsolete', and a scepticism or 'cynicism about the relevance of most social institutions and value systems to personal lives' (Rattansi & Phoenix 1997, in Berzonsky 2005:126).

Rosenau (1992:53) describes the postmodern individual as the sceptic's alternative to the modern subject. Her argument is epitomised by the following summarising remarks:

The post-modern individual is relaxed and flexible, orientated toward feelings and emotions, interiorization, and holding a 'be yourself' attitude. S/he is an active human being constituting his/her own social reality, pursuing a personal quest for meaning ... Post-modern individuals are concerned with their own lives, their particular personal satisfaction, and self-promotion. Less concerned with old loyalties and modern affiliations such as marriage, family, church, and nation, they are more orientated toward their own needs. (pp. 53, 54)

Postmodern individuals are rootless and adrift because they believe that they do not have anything to hold on to (Pearse 2005:9; Interview with Ms Catherine Botha, Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, 15 June 2007, Pretoria). Much of their rootlessness is grounded in a lack of spirituality and a lack of certainty about religion.

Tomlinson (1997:243–244) asks: 'Where do values come from?' In his reply to this question, he emphasises that values come from lived human experiences, sifted and evaluated. He links values and morals when he refers to the 'moral glue' of common values. Berzonsky (2005:127) expresses his concern regarding the threat to traditional value systems as follows: 'As options and life-styles have proliferated and the legitimacy of traditional value systems has waned, the basis for self-definition and maintaining a sense of identity has become increasingly problematic.' Hölscher (2005:237) quotes Reamer's (1998) lament that religious and secular institutions and traditions seem to increasingly lose their ability to ensure the moral conduct of individuals.

According to Mason (2001:48), the modernity's processes have led to a 'disenchantment of the world, which has in turn contributed to diminished moral responsibility.' The formerly mainly religious worldview of traditional society has collapsed, which has created a greater potential for more fluid identity construction and the rise of individualism. According to Mason (2001:50), the moral ambiguity of our times results from a 'collapse of traditional sources of authority' and the uncertainty about which ethical code to follow. He sees the 'postmodern moral crisis' as a 'realisation that sources of moral authority to which we might have traditionally turned are contested.' As a result, there is no fixed source of 'right' action. There are no longer traditional patterns, codes and rules to guide and serve as orientation points for individuals (Gane 2001:269, 270). Individuals are left secluded and anxious with their own personal troubles and must therefore take responsibility for their own self-determination.

Mason (2001:64) states that postmodern individuals no longer 'nurture' or 'seek to be nurtured in our social environment' or in the meaning that might have been generated in relationships with community, with the earth and its seasons and with God. For the purposes of control, postmodern individuals aim to decrease the risk and uncertainty of their lives by means of abstract calculation. The focus is more on a technological ability to calculate and control their lives than to depend on each other.

If the researchers were to consider these opinions to be valid, they could assume that postmodernism could possibly have a negative impact on the social functioning of the postmodern individual and young adults in particular. However, by contrast, supporters of a postmodern paradigm emphasise positive changes in worldviews. This is evident from the wide range of new social movements, new norms concerning diversity and alternative lifestyles. A plurality of voices,

including the voices of the victimised, the marginalised and those 'at risk', is emphasised. Cultural pluralism, diversity and difference offer opportunities to review one's own experiences and values from different perspectives (Mason 2001:51; Schweitzer 2004:4). The result could be greater tolerance, less narrow-mindedness and greater tentativeness about making assumptions.

The only reasonable assumption, in the researchers' opinion, would be that postmodernism, as a paradigm of our times, has an impact on social functioning. The exact nature of this impact is however not known, but it is of social concern in general and of concern to the multidisciplinary practitioners involved with the young adult in particular. A contribution to an improved understanding of the impact of postmodernism on young adults' social functioning could provide not only knowledge about and insight into the often-debated postmodern paradigm, but also into a life stage that could be described as troubled and 'at risk' (Mason 2001:51; Schweitzer 2004:4).

Although postmodernism influences different dimensions of social functioning, as mentioned previously, the focus of this article is on the young adult's perceptions regarding religion and formal structures. In the context of this study, formal structures refer to traditional systems characterised by authority, for example schools and churches. The research question is therefore: What is the impact of postmodernism on the perceptions of young adults regarding religion and formal structures? In order to obtain an answer to this question, an empirical study was conducted to investigate this impact. The purpose of this article is thus to report on the results of this study.

The researchers will provide a brief literature review, a discussion of research methodology utilised to execute the study, as well as a presentation of the empirical results.

Literature review

Zagorin (1997:299) addresses postmodernism and values when he states that the basic impulse of postmodernism lies in its denial of the values and assumptions of the preceding high modernist movement. On the topic of values and morality Himmelfarb (1997:167) declares that postmodernism is intentionally far more radical than either Marxism or the new 'isms', all of which are committed to the Enlightenment principles of reason, truth, justice, morality and reality. Postmodernism rejects both the values and the rhetoric of the Enlightenment. In rejecting the 'discipline' of knowledge and rationality, postmodernism also rejects the 'discipline' of society and authority; and undermines and challenges the structure of society (Himmelfarb 1997:167). Atherton and Bollard (2002:422) refer to 'standards' in their criticism of postmodernism. They state that, in the postmodern mind, 'the whole idea of standards of any kind or under any circumstances in any field of knowledge or practice comes into question and everything becomes relative' (Atherton & Bollard 2002:422).

Smith (1999:17) discusses Bauman's view that the postmodern world is a world of rootless strangers where men and women try to survive and create meaning by drawing on whatever personal resources they happen to have. Bauman sees the postmodern world as a world where people do not have the reassuring guidance of moral absolutes enforced by higher powers. When men and women are confronted with ethical dilemmas:

they can no longer refer them 'upwards' to the bureaucrats, professionals, politicians, scientists or 'experts' acting as a kind of moral priesthood ... in fact, they have to – choose for themselves which rules of behaviour to follow in particular life situations. (Smith 1999:18)

For Donovan (2003:288) the formulation of morals does seem to be straightforward. Her definition of 'moral' suggests that 'it is concerned with the distinction between right and wrong and with goodness and badness of character.' Gray and Lovat (2006:207), however, refer to Habermas's placement of morals in the subjective realm, when he states his belief that our moral beliefs are deeply personal matters, seeing that only we can know whether we are being true to our values. Values come from lived human experiences, which are sifted and evaluated to become human constructs (Tomlinson 1997:243). We must therefore work at giving our lives meaning and therefore value. Tomlinson (1997:244, 250) refers to the 'moral glue' being washed out when he refers to the contemporary moment where the individual is being reared only with regard to 'self' and with the assertion that altruism is impossible.

From the discussion above, it seems as if the individual living in today's postmodern paradigm is prone to reject standards and traditional values. The individual lives according to own personal moral beliefs and values with a focus on the 'self'. There seems to be a focus on own 'best interests' and a lack of empathy with others.

Berzonsky's (2005:133) view on morality is worth mentioning. He states that 'we live in a relativistic, postmodern age of continual social, political, economic and technological change.' Baumeister, as cited in Berzonsky (2005:133, 134), asserts that historically there was a socially based public consensus about moral character and how people should behave. Consequently, youth internalised the standards, goals and expectations of others. In the postmodern age, this process of internalisation is complicated due to continuous change, different options and lifestyle choices, as well as the relativistic nature of values and morality.

Inglehart (2000:224) states that a postmodern worldview 'has diminished the need for the reassurance that religion traditionally provided.' This worldview brings about a 'declining acceptance of rigid religious norms concerning sex and reproduction and a diminishing need for absolute rules.' Legg and Stagaki (2002:386) refer to Lyotard, who stated that 'most Westerners ... are postmodernists, living in a consumer society that has rejected the metanarratives of science and religion.' According to Hölscher (2005:239), Lipovetsky holds a similar view when he describes late modernity as signified

by the increasing 'liberalisation' of individuals from such ideas as self-sacrifice, accountability to morals, ideas and values. Hölscher (2005:239) states that it is claimed that religious and secular institutions and traditions are losing their ability to ensure the moral conduct of individuals.

Schweitzer (2004) holds a very similar view on morality and religion. He states that the:

... secular city ... has become a meeting place of many different religions and of a variety of worldviews. In many countries around the world, the influence of traditional religious institutions like the church has decreased markedly and still seems to be on the decline. (p. 89)

Schweitzer (2004:89) does however point out that other forms of individual religion and a new interest in spirituality have increased. A spiritual hunger seems apparent during postmodern times.

Spirituality as one of the basic components of human composition is emphasised by Singleton, Mason and Webber (2004:249, 250) who perceive spirituality as the basis of the distinctive human attributes of thought, language and rationality. In their opinion, spirituality defines humanity; 'it is the attraction to the things of the Spirit rather than to earthly things'; it is 'the conscious living of a Christian way of life.' Furthermore, Singleton *et al.* (2004:250) quote Wuthnow, as well as Marler and Hadaway, who point out that in late modernity, spirituality 'begins to be understood as no longer necessarily linked to institutional religion, sometimes even standing in opposition to it.' Singleton *et al.* (2004:250) ask what has taken the place of religion in providing life's meaning and shaping the way it is lived. Wessels and Müller (2013:6) investigated the association of spirituality and meaningful living and came to the conclusion that 'there exists a vast corpus of research linking spirituality to meaning.'

In terms of the young adult, Singleton *et al.* (2004:250) ask questions about the cultural resources utilised by young adults as 'interpretive structures for their life journeys and life stories.' These questions may imply that the current social context characterised by cultural plurality of postmodernity, increasing anxiety about risk, increase in consumerism, dislocated families and a shift towards gender equality, results in the trend that the spirituality of the contemporary young adult is unlike that of previous generations.

Barry and Nelson's (2005:115) discussion of the role of religion in the transition to adulthood provide insight in this regard. They refer to Arnett's (2000) 'emerging adulthood' as a period characterised by heightened risk-taking behaviour and self-exploration of numerous domains, including their spirituality. Barry and Nelson (2005) state that:

- 'young people:
- question the beliefs in which they were raised
 - place greater emphasis on individual spirituality than affiliation with a religious institution
 - pick and choose the aspects of religion that suit them best.' (p. 115)

It seems evident from the above that the young adult's values and moral beliefs are deeply personal matters. They seem to choose their own rules of behaviour to follow in particular life situations. Beliefs are based on own opinions and judgements. This confirms a typical characteristic of postmodernism, namely individualism. Individualism is described by Kirkpatrick Johnson and Monserud (2009:387) as an orientation towards one's own welfare. The result of this focus on the 'self' seems to be a lack of meaning and a subsequent search for ultimate meaning in life. In distancing himself or herself from formal structures and from the church, the young adult seems to be rootless and yearning for spirituality unique to postmodern times. To explore the young adult's perceptions regarding religion and formal structures, the researchers conducted the proposed study.

Research methodology

Within a mixed methods research approach (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007), the exploratory mixed methods research design (Delpont & Fouché 2011:441) was utilised, seeing that it comprises both a qualitative and a quantitative component. This approach and design were appropriate because a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data do not only corroborate, but also expand understanding and provide a comprehensive analysis of young adults' perceptions of religion and formal structures within a postmodern era.

In this study the relative weight of the two approaches were not equal. A greater emphasis was placed on quantitative methods in order to address the research problem (Delpont & Fouché 2011:444). The researchers started the empirical study with the qualitative approach to obtain rich data that could assist to construct a questionnaire for the dominant quantitative part of the study. Sequential timing, within the exploratory mixed methods design, with the qualitative data collected and analysed first, followed by the quantitative data, therefore allowed the one data set to build upon the other.

Seeing that a certain level of education was necessary for completion of the questionnaire, the researchers decided to recruit only young adults who were functioning on a tertiary level. As a result, the population of the study was young adults, between the ages of 18 and 25 years, who were registered as students at a South African tertiary institution. From this population, a sample of 47 young adults was purposively (Strydom 2011:232) selected for the qualitative part of the study. In order to collect qualitative data, four focus groups were conducted. The size of the focus groups varied between nine and 14 participants per group.

As suggested by Ivankova, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007:271), categories revealed through qualitative analysis were used to develop survey items for the questionnaire utilised in the quantitative part of the study. In the context of this study, the researchers analysed qualitative data according to an integration of Creswell's (1998) analytic spiral and Marshall and Rossman's (1999) process of data analysis, as described by De Vos (2005:334–339). Data were analysed

through thematic analysis. Responses were categorised and synthesised and patterns were identified and interpreted according to themes and sub-themes (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos 2011:410).

To ensure the trustworthiness of data (Schurink *et al.* 2011: 422) a variety of strategies, namely reflexivity, audit trail, triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking was utilised (Glesne 2006:36; Leitz, Langer & Furman 2006: 446–456; Schurink *et al.* 2011:421, 422).

In the quantitative part of the study, the researchers selected a sample of 1019 male and female young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 years, who were registered students at the specific tertiary institution. Based on the mentioned criteria, the researchers utilised a combination of purposive and accidental sampling (Strydom 2011:232; Gravetter & Forzano 2003:125) to select the sample.

To collect quantitative data the researchers utilised a group-administered questionnaire to measure the young adult's perception of religion and formal structures from a post-modern perspective. The collected data were analysed and captured electronically in Microsoft Excel, and the responses were then read into Statistical Analysis System (version 9.3). A range of descriptive and inferential statistical procedures was used (Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee 2006:163) and research findings were presented by means of exploratory factor analysis and analysis of variance in terms of relationships with relevant demographic groups.

Ethical considerations

This study adheres to internationally accepted ethical requirements. Written informed consent indicating the respondents' agreement to participate voluntarily in the study was obtained. Written permission to conduct the research at the specific tertiary institution was obtained from both the Registrar and the Dean of Students, as well as ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities.

In order to avoid possible harm the researchers continuously evaluated the research process (Gravetter & Forzano 2003:63). No harm to respondents was however observed. To ensure anonymity, the respondents completed questionnaires on an anonymous basis, whilst participants not providing identifying details, ensured confidentiality during focus group discussions.

Research findings

Research findings are presented by means of exploratory factor analysis (Field & Miles 2010:548) in order to explain the characteristics of young adults' perceptions of religion and formal structures. The variables that cluster together were plotted according to the extent to which they relate to religion and formal structures as a factor. The coordinates of a variable, known as factor loadings, represent its relationship

to the factor. Factor loadings clarify the relative contribution that a variable makes to this specific factor (Field & Miles 2010:544, 545).

Religion and formal structures were analysed and discussed according to content and relationships between variables. When discussing content, the items retained were examined in terms of the rotated factor loadings of items, the frequencies and percentages of responses and the factor Cronbach alphas. Table 1 displays gathered data.

The religion and formal structures factor contains ten items. The factor loadings indicate which items are most strongly aligned with the factor and therefore explain its characteristics. The first five items in this factor, therefore the items with the highest factor scores, relate directly to religion. The remaining items that form part of this factor relate to formal and cultural structures and authority.

The first 5 of the 10 items have a factor loading of above 0.7, whilst the next two items have a factor loading of above 0.5. The last three items have a loading of 0.3 or higher. These 10 items share underlying dimensions and are measuring characteristics of this specific factor. The internal consistency for the factor 'Religion and formal structures' was high, with a Cronbach coefficient alpha of 0.87. The high Cronbach's alpha confirmed reliability of this scale in terms of the measurement of this factor.

When the frequencies of specific items, indicating how the respondents rated the items, were analysed, the following became evident: 715 respondents (71.14%) indicated that religious institutions guide their lives to large extent; religious structures were important to 862 respondents (85.43%); organised religion was important to 783 respondents (77.91%); and the attendance of religious meetings was important to 660 respondents (65.64%). This indicated a strong tendency towards traditional and conventional religious norms and practices. Eight hundred and eight (808) respondents (80.32%) indicated that spiritual norms guide their behaviour to a large extent which correlates with the preceding items.

The remaining items that form part of this factor relate to formal and cultural structures and authority. Once again, respondents portrayed a strong traditional and conventional

outlook. A majority of 865 respondents (85.9%) valued guidance by formal structures, for example school and church. It is however interesting to note that a number of respondents crossed out 'church' on the questionnaire and seemed to only favour 'school' in the context of this question. Traditional views regarding sexual activity was valued by 695 respondents (68.81%), whilst cultural structures and cultural background was important to respectively 691 respondents (68.48%) and 789 (78.2%) of respondents. Regard for the views of people with authority seemed to correlate highly with the items mentioned earlier, seeing that 859 respondents (85.22%) regarded the views of people with authority as important. The researchers found this very interesting, seeing that participants in focus group discussions voiced opinions such as 'certain structures have become archaic', 'we are our own authority' and 'authority must be earned'. Harris (2009:304) is of the view that globalisation has loosened young people's traditional citizenship ties, especially their national identities, and has undermined their belief in the 'efficacy of the nation-state'. The impact of globalisation is felt because of increased migration, the Internet, the increase and ease of travel and the powerful impact of global youth consumer culture.

One of several uses of factor analysis is to utilise a smaller subset of variables for further analysis. To determine this subset of variables the researchers studied the demographic profile of respondents. The specific variables that were significant in terms of postmodernism were age, gender, race and the area where respondents spent their childhood (childhood home). The relationship between these variables and the factor religion and formal structures was thus also analysed. Table 2 presents the outcome of the relationship between the specific factor and the demographic variables.

In Table 2 the relationships between the variables age, gender, race and area where respondents spent most of their childhood (childhood home) and the factor religion and formal structures, are indicated. The *P*-values indicate whether there is a significant difference between the factor scores of groups of respondents, where $p < 0.05$ indicates statistically significant differences between the factor scores. The A and B symbols under pairwise comparison in Table 2 indicate which groups; (within each demographic variable) have significantly different scores. Scheffé's test was used for

TABLE 1: Religion and formal structures.

Variables	Factor loadings	Frequency (%)	
		Low extent	High extent
1. To what extent do religious institutions guide your life?	0.823	28.86	71.14
2. To what extent are religious structures important to you?	0.810	14.57	85.43
3. To what extent do you need organised religion in your life?	0.789	22.09	77.91
4. How important is it for you to attend regular religious meetings?	0.784	34.46	65.64
5. To what extent do spiritual norms guide your behaviour?	0.718	19.68	80.32
6. How important is guidance by formal structures (e.g. school, church) for you?	0.526	14.10	85.90
7. To what extent do you value traditional views regarding sexual activity?	0.508	31.19	68.81
8. To what extent are cultural structures important to you?	0.449	31.52	68.48
9. To what extent does your cultural background guide your behaviour?	0.403	21.80	78.20
10. To what extent are the views of people with authority important to you?	0.305	14.78	85.22

Cronbach coefficient alpha: 0.87.

Note: % of variance in data space explained by factor: 23%.

TABLE 2: Religion and formal structures – relationship with demographic variables.

Variable	N	Mean (SD)	F statistic	P-value	Pairwise comparison
Age			0.22	0.6358	
18–20	545	3.08 (0.59)	-	-	A
Over 20	466	3.10 (0.63)	-	-	A
Gender			16.85	< 0.0001	
Male	329	2.98 (0.65)	-	-	A
Female	685	3.15 (0.58)	-	-	B
Race			7.96	0.0049	
Black	319	3.18 (0.52)	-	-	A
White	658	3.06 (0.64)	-	-	B
Childhood home			9.65	< 0.0001	
Rural	117	3.24 (0.51)	-	-	A
Semi-urban	313	3.17 (0.51)	-	-	A
Urban	565	3.03 (0.66)	-	-	B

N, 'N is the total sample size ...' (Field 2009:649).

SD, Standard deviation is 'an estimate of the average variability (spread) of a set of data measured in the same units of measurement as the original data. It is the square root of the variance' (Field 2009:794).

F, An F statistic or F ratio 'compares the amount of systematic variance in the data to the amount of unsystematic variance' (Field 2009:349).

P-value, 'Probability (the probability value, p-value or significance of a test are usually denoted by p)' (Field 2009:xxxiii).

Note: The A and B under pairwise comparison indicate which groups have significantly different scores.

pairwise comparisons between the three different groups in the 'childhood home' variable (Field & Miles 2010:317, 318).

Age as variable was subdivided into two categories, 18–20 years and over 20 years, which implies 21–25 years. No significant relationship between 'age' and religion and formal structures as a factor was found ($p = 0.6358$).

'Gender' as a variable was portrayed as male and female. Gender was significantly related to religion and formal structures as a factor in this study ($p < 0.0001$). When comparing the means of the factor scores of females (3.15) and males (2.98), females scored religion and formal structures higher than males, indicating that this factor has greater significance for females. The differences between the means of the factor scores are not significant and must be seen in the context of ratings on a scale of 1 to 4 and the large sample size ($n = 1014$) which makes the statistical test sensitive to small differences. A similar finding applies to 'race', where Indian (1.77%) and Coloured (1.38%) were combined with Black (31.4%) to form two categories, namely Black and White. Here the relationship was significant ($p = 0.0049$). Black respondents scored religion and formal structures higher than white respondents did, which indicates that religion and formal structures are more important to Black respondents than to White respondents.

'Childhood home' refers to the area where respondents spent their childhood. This variable was subdivided into rural area, semi-urban area and urban area. A significant relationship between 'childhood home' and religion and formal structures as a factor was found and Scheffé's test was used for pairwise comparisons between the different groups in this variable (Field & Miles, 2010:317, 318). Childhood home was significantly related to religion and formal structures ($p < 0.0001$). Rural (3.24) and semi-urban (3.17) respondents rated religion and formal structures as more important than urban (3.03) respondents.

Discussion

Although qualitative findings are not presented separately in this article, these findings are integrated in the discussion of the quantitative results. In a complementary manner, the integration of qualitative and quantitative results provides an answer to the research question that guided the study, namely: What is the impact of postmodernism on the perceptions of young adults regarding religion and formal structures?

The quantitative data presented mostly confirms qualitative findings, but nuance differences were found in the analysis of the quantitative data. Diverse views and often directly opposing views were found even though the sample could be considered homogenous. This aspect will be elaborated on in this section.

When the frequencies of specific items, indicating how respondents rated the items, were analysed, the following became evident: Quantitative findings indicated a tendency towards valuing traditional and conventional religious norms and practices. Pearce and Denton (2009:413) propose a renewed interest in the social importance of religion. They claim a growing acknowledgement that religion is important for global, local and individual identity, for social relationships and for general well-being (Pearce & Denton 2009:413). This seems to be reflected by the majority of respondents in this research, despite what Pearce and Denton (2009:418) refer to as 'past generations' predictions of the waning importance of religion to social life.' Pearce and Denton (2009:415) quote research by Regnerus *et al.* (2003) and Mason *et al.* (2007) which claims that the most commonly cited source of religiosity amongst youth is parental religiosity. According to socialisation theories, parents teach and set examples in ways that reinforce religiosity. Barry and Nelson (2005:115), however, state that young people question the beliefs according to which they were raised and select the aspects of religion that suit them. Regard for family, and specifically for parents and their views, was important to respondents. Socialisation and regard for the views of parents could therefore influence the views of young adults. This regard could have bearing on the young adult's attitude towards religion.

The need for religion, indicated by most respondents, did not necessarily include a need to attend regular religious meetings. This supports Barry and Nelson's (2005:115) view that young adults choose aspects of religion that suit them.

However, an even higher percentage of respondents (80.32%) indicated that spiritual norms guide their behaviour. Schweitzer (2004:89), as well as Steyn and Lotter (2006:547) refer to an increase in spirituality in postmodern times, but state that it is not necessarily linked to institutional religion. This tendency seemed to be evident in this research. The researchers found it interesting that several respondents crossed out 'church' on the questionnaire, signifying that they favour guidance by formal structures, but that these structures do not necessarily refer to 'church'. Steyn and Lotter

(2006:548) confirm this finding with their statement that there has been a dramatic decrease in the impact of the church and of moral leaders and role models on young people.

Regarding 'spirituality', the following was found: during qualitative data gathering (the focus group discussions) 'spirituality' as a concept was explored. It became apparent that exactly what is meant by this concept is unclear. A 'source of guidance or enlightenment'; 'something to draw on'; 'a search for meaning'; 'open-mindedness'; 'something very personal that influences your morals', was some of the terminology used by focus group members to describe this concept. This supports Singleton *et al.*'s (2004:248) view that the spirituality of generation Y is unlike that of previous generations. Generation Y refers to the generation born between 1980 and 2002 (Parment 2012:1). It was clear that not all participants referred to spirituality in the context of religion (Barry & Nelson 2005:115). A 'spiritual hunger' and an interest in spirituality were however projected by respondents in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research (Schweitzer 2004:89; Sigelman & Rider 2009:399). Steyn and Lotter (2006:548) quote Van Huyssteen, who refers to a vague spirituality and a search for a transcendence that is larger and more than '*die ervoaring self*' [the experience itself].

Correlation analysis on the factor scores of quantitative data indicated that gender was significantly related to religion and formal structures, as females scored religion and formal structures higher than males, which indicated that religion seems to be more important to the young females who participated in this study. This finding supports Pearce and Denton's (2009:416) statement that females report higher religious involvement than males. These authors also report that youth who are more extroverted and 'less risk averse' are drawn to religion and tend to remain involved in religion (Pearce & Denton 2009:416). Patel, Ramgoon and Paruk (2009:267) quote research by Gauthier *et al.* (2006) which indicates that their female sample reported higher levels of life satisfaction and religiosity, compared to much lower levels in the male sample. Their own research indicated a similar finding. Differences in socialisation and women's roles in society explained the variations in their research (Patel *et al.* 2009:271). Kirkpatrick Johnson and Monserud (2009:388) report that young females also hold stronger pro-social values and regard purpose and meaning in life as more important than males.

Black respondents in this research scored religion and formal structures higher than White respondents did, which indicates that religion and formal structures are more important to Black respondents than to White respondents. In their research, Patel *et al.* (2009:272) found that Black and Indian students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal reported higher levels of religiosity than White students. These researchers made the statement that they can only speculate on the reasons for these variations in their findings:

Black students are more likely to use spirituality as a resource that they can fall back on to make sense of and deal with lives

that they perceive as less privileged and less satisfactory. (Patel *et al.* 2009:272)

In this study the researchers did not explore reasons for the Black/White differences found by means of correlation analysis.

Childhood home was also significantly related to religion and formal structures, as rural and semi-urban respondents rated religion and formal structures as more important than urban respondents did. Respondents who grew up in rural and semi-urban areas possibly had a more conventional upbringing, with an emphasis on traditional values and norms reflected in their views on formal structures and religion.

Additionally, attitudes regarding the formal and cultural structures and authority were explored within this factor. Mention was made above of 'guidance by formal structures', which was regarded as important by respondents. Similarly, they portrayed regard for the views of people with authority. This regard was qualified within the focus group discussions when it was clearly stated that 'authority must be earned' and that 'respect is given, if deserved.' This finding is supported by Steyn and Lotter (2006:546), who state that power and respect must be earned, based on genuineness, integrity and acceptance. Knowledge and expertise especially were highly regarded by participants in focus groups. However, the following views were also clearly stated: 'We are our own authority' ... 'we are a group that want to challenge everything.' These views are consistent with the postmodern values of self-expression instead of respect for authority (Inglehart 2000:223). Du Toit (2000:54) holds a similar view when he states that pure knowledge is an illusion and authoritative structures are incompatible with the postmodern tendency not to think in absolutes, but to focus on personal experiences and on own interpretation. This tendency was confirmed in the quantitative study when respondents were questioned on the extent to which choice is based on personal experience. An overwhelming percentage of respondents (95.85%) indicated that for them, choice is largely based on personal experience. A similar tendency in favour of choice and personal experience was portrayed when questioned about making own rules (65.31% make own rules to a large extent) and the influence of life experiences (89.73% of respondents indicated that their values develop from life experiences).

During focus group discussions, respect for authority was linked to culture and tradition. 'I will be respectful towards them, because it is tradition', was one of the comments made regarding the manner in which cultural practices impact respect for authority – in this case, respect for parents. In the quantitative phase of the study, cultural structures and a cultural background were important to respectively 68.48% of respondents and 78.2% of respondents. The link between authority and culture was further expanded to include values. This is illustrated in the following manner: 'I think we mimic our parents. So, your values are basically determined by culture and by your beliefs.'

Although the focus of this factor was on religion, authority, formal structures and cultural beliefs, views regarding sexual activity were also included in this factor, because of its link to morality, as well as to cultural and traditional practices. A large percentage of respondents (68.81%) valued traditional views regarding sexual activity. What exactly was meant by 'traditional views' was however not explored or clarified in the questionnaire. Further clarification of these views was provided during the focus group discussions. Both conformist, more conservative views, as well as liberal views were voiced regarding commitment within sexual relationships and cohabitation versus marriage. Sigelman and Rider (2009:369) make the statement that delaying the age of marriage has resulted in changing norms regarding sexual experimentation, leading to varied adult sexual lifestyles. Dreyer (2004:923) confirms the fact that young people within the postmodern era have a different view on sexuality and traditional roles. Mills, Blossfeld and Klijzing (2005:431) also reported on the 'shift from more permanent unions to non-marital cohabitation.' These authors found support for their 'flexible-partnership' hypothesis, which argued that a sensible reaction for youth is to choose a relationship that has less of a binding commitment.

Cognisance needs to be taken of the fact that, even though the majority of respondents portrayed a more conservative view regarding religion, spirituality, authority and formal structures, a considerable number of respondents in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research did not hold conventional views. The following verbatim quote by a participant illustrates this: '...you question your religion, you question your parents' views... and how they impose their beliefs on you.'

Kirkpatrick Johnson and Monserud (2009:386) quote research by Inglehart and Welzel (2005) which found that rankings of traditional values, regarding religion, nationalism, obedience and leading a 'clean and moral life' declined amongst young people. These values are replaced by 'secular-rational values as nations develop economically' (Kirkpatrick Johnson & Monserud 2009:386). Traditional survival values are replaced by self-expression values. Views and values therefore seem person-specific and based on emotions and experiences (Jones 2009:69).

Kirkpatrick Johnson and Monserud (2009) state that in general:

young adults who are more religious are less materialistic, report more concern and responsibility for the well-being of others, and attach more importance to finding purpose and meaning in their lives. (p. 378)

An improved understanding of the impact of postmodernism on young adults' perception of religion and formal structures has provided insight into the postmodern paradigm, as well as into a life stage often described as 'troubled' and 'at-risk'. The findings provide an indication that the postmodern young adult displays a tendency to value religious norms and practices, but the element of choice is of importance, as young adults seem to choose the aspects of religion that suit

them. An increased interest in and a need for spirituality or a form of transcendence was found. This finding is confirmed by Dreyer (2004:925) who highlights that young people show an interest in spiritual matters. Even though this need was voiced, what was meant by 'spirituality' could however not be articulated in a clear manner. A vagueness and indistinctness was evident in the descriptions of spirituality provided, which emphasised a need which could not be clearly articulated. The spiritual hunger referred to by Schweitzer (2004:89) seems to be hindered by elusiveness.

Limitations of the research study need to be mentioned. Even though the research sample included 47 participants for the qualitative part and 1019 respondents who completed the questionnaire, research findings cannot be generalised to the larger population, since the sample is largely homogeneous in that it comprised of only young adults studying at a tertiary institution. The motivation for this decision, as discussed, was that a certain level of education was necessary for completion of the questionnaire. The views expressed are those of young adults from an urban area, and even though they might be from rural and semi-urban areas originally, they were exposed to urban surroundings and influences during the period when the data was gathered.

Recommendations

Based on research findings, recommendations are made for application in practice and in terms of future research.

Recommendations for practice application

Intervention with the young adult holds unique challenges when considering their inclination towards choice, their focus on own needs and their desire for instantaneous solutions. The young adult assumes multiple roles, which result in a variety of social demands. In order to relate to the young adult, in-depth understanding of the challenges and demands relating to the specific life stage and the role performances required are necessary.

A practitioner or professional should acknowledge the young adult's need to focus on himself, his own well-being and on his perceptions of reality. The young adult needs to be accepted as a unique and worthy individual who esteems his own abilities to make rules for himself. During intervention with the young adult, his focus on himself, his own needs and satisfactions, the importance of his image and his own personal experiences, should therefore be incorporated.

Furthermore, formal structures and organised religion do not provide the guidance sought by young adults. Values guide thinking about crucial issues. Postmodern values reflect a pursuit of own well-being. Practitioners specialising in young adulthood and in the demands posed by this life stage could provide guidance and a broader objective perspective in terms of the young adult's future roles.

Demands placed on young adults delay the transition to adulthood, for example the extended period of education,

which results in lifelong learning. This extended period necessitates careful planning. Without guidance from family members, this transition is demanding. Parents are often not equipped with the knowledge or access to relevant resources to assist in this vital planning process. Parental guidance is recommended in order to equip parents in understanding and guiding their young adult children in terms of the challenges faced during this life stage.

Recommendations for future research

This research focuses on early adulthood as a life stage within a postmodern time frame. The following research topics can have value for practitioners in various disciplines who are involved with young adults:

- The impact of the prolonged school-to-work transition period on the young adult's self-esteem and general well-being.
- The impact of changes in the traditional role markers of adulthood on the young adult in contemporary South Africa.
- An exploration of the impact of young adult values and beliefs on social roles and behaviour.
- The role functions and future prospects of young adults in rural and semi-urban areas.
- The impact of social class/gender/race/ethnicity on the young adult's social context.
- The impact of deculturalisation on the social functioning of the African young adult.
- The impact of geographical area and socio-economic status on transitions to adulthood in the South African context.

Conclusion

This article discussed the perceptions of young adults regarding religion and formal structures in a postmodern era. The results illustrated that the contemporary young adult between the ages of 18 and 25 years explores and experiments in terms of his or her identity and her lifestyle. Thinking, questioning, feeling and a strong focus on 'self' characterise this young adult. Views and values seem to be person-specific and based on emotions and experiences.

The contemporary young adult is raised with a regard for the self. The rise of individualism which characterises the postmodern era has led to the creation of meaning by drawing on personal resources and on own personal moral beliefs and values. A focus on the 'self' and on 'choice' seems to influence the development of values and has led to a feeling of 'rootlessness' caused by the absence of 'something to hold onto'.

In this regard Jones (2009:182) states that '[y]oung people have been seen as a social barometer, as indicators of the state of the society they live in ...' When considering this statement by Jones, the young adult's perception of religion and formal structures could also be regarded as indicative of the spirit of our contemporary age. This highlights the relevance of research on young adulthood.

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Authors' contribution

H.H. (University of Pretoria) wrote this article as part of the requirements for a DPhil (Social Work) and was supervised by C.S.L.D. (University of Pretoria).

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