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# Deconversion Processes and Quality of Life among Polish Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Social Support

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## ABSTRACT

During adolescence, biological, psychological, and social changes naturally propel youth to confront religious matters and form outlooks, moral beliefs, and religious attitudes. However, it is not uncommon for them to manifest changes of affiliation with a religious group or a total removal of all religious expressions within their lives. In Poland, a decline in the level of religiosity of young people has been reported for years. This study aimed to analyze how processes of deconversion affect adolescents' quality of life. In total, 272 respondents aged between 14 and 18 ( $M = 15.74$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) participated in the research. The Adolescent Deconversion Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and Quality of Life Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents were applied. The results showed that existential emptiness and faith abandonment predicted lower adolescent satisfaction, since they weakened the sense of family support. However, moral criticism predicted higher social integration, because adolescents who criticize moral rules taught by religion had a stronger sense of peer support.

## Introduction

Adolescence is a specific period of human development in which biological, psychological, and social changes naturally propel youth to confront religious matters, such as seeking meaning and purpose, making lifestyle choices, experiencing transcendence, but also questioning their worldview or values (King et al., 2013). In confronting the main developmental tasks of adolescence – to establish self-definition and belonging, and to grapple with abstract ideologies and concepts of transcendence – religiousness may be an important factor (King et al., 2013). Religious changes characteristic of adolescence usually occur between the ages of 15 and 16 and are vital for individuals from all cultural and social backgrounds (Schnitker et al., 2014).

In the process of forming a meaningful identity, adolescents confront a variety of beliefs, values, and roles, and begin to ask existential questions and search for purpose (Paloutzian et al., 2013). Simultaneously with this pursuit of identity, they renegotiate their social ties and begin to emphasize the importance of affiliations, particularly outside the family, such as with peers, but also with mentors, organizations, institutions, and ideologies. Finally, they engage cognitively with narratives, meaning systems, and moral codes, potentially becoming able to connect meaningfully to something beyond themselves, whether that be God, a belief system, or a group of people (King et al., 2013). Thus, in the adolescence period, young people form their outlook, moral beliefs, and religious attitudes. In the religious domain, there may appear different forms of defiance against the existing order, which can take the form of a change of affiliation with a religious group, manifest itself in assuming a rationalistic attitude toward life, or in a total removal of all religious expressions of one's life (Nowosielski & Bartczuk, 2017). A departure from one's current system of beliefs, practices, morality, and disaffiliation

from the religious or spiritual community – which in the literature is referred to as *deconversion* – can be considered a vital aspect of religious transformation among adolescents. The aim of this study was to examine how deconversion processes relate to adolescents' quality of life and whether social support can explain the mechanism of this relationship.

### **Religious transformation: deconversion**

The term *deconversion* can be defined as “the depth and intensity of biographical change that can be associated with disbelief and/or disaffiliation” (Paloutzian et al., 2013, p. 408). When defining deconversion, Streib and Keller (2004) referred to autobiographical accounts of the deconversions of leading theologians, philosophers, and other writers presented by John Barbour (1994). Barbour used the term *deconversion* in the broad meaning of the “loss or deprivation of religious faith” and distinguished four characteristics of deconversion: intellectual doubt in regard to the truth of a system of beliefs; rejection of the way of life of a religious group; emotional suffering, e.g., grief, guilt, loneliness, despair; and disaffiliation from the community. Streib and Keller (2004) evaluated Barbour's (1994) conceptualization of deconversion in the light of Stark and Glock (1970) five dimensions of religious commitment and found some correspondence between Barbour's list and Glock's five dimensions of religion. According to Streib and Keller (2004), Barbour's intellectual doubt corresponds to Glock's ideological and intellectual dimensions; moral criticism can be associated with the ritualistic dimension, while emotional suffering relates to the consequential dimension. However, Glock's experiential dimension does not possess an equivalent in Barbour's list. Nevertheless, it may be important to feel the loss of religious experiences as part of a deconversion process. Because of this, Streib and Keller (2004) added the loss of religious experiences to the list of elements in their conceptualization of deconversion (Paloutzian et al., 2013). Thus, five elements of deconversion were identified: (1) loss of specific religious experiences; this means the loss of finding meaning and purpose in life and the loss of the experience of God; (2) intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism, which means a rejection of specific prescriptions and/or the application of a new level of moral judgment; (4) emotional suffering, which can consist of a loss of embeddedness, social support, sense of stability, and safety; and (5) disaffiliation from the community, which can consist of a retreat from participation in meetings or from the observance of religious practices; finally, the termination of membership eventually follows (Streib & Keller, 2004). The use of these five processes suggests that deconversion is an intense phenomenon that includes both individual and social aspects: experiential, emotional, intellectual, social, and moral, thus preventing the reduction of deconversion to merely disaffiliation from the group (Paloutzian et al., 2013).

### **Empirical studies on deconversion**

The history of research on deconversion reveals that it is relatively recent and used to occur occasionally (Paloutzian et al., 2013). An extensive project that systematically addressed some of these issues was the Bielefeld cross-cultural study of deconversion (Streib et al., 2009). The research was conducted between 2002 and 2005 and included a total of 129 deconverts in Germany and the United States. In Germany, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, as measured by Ryff's (1989) Psychological Well-Being Scale, were significantly lower for deconverts compared with in-tradition members. On the other hand, in the United States, deconverts increase in autonomy and personal growth and show no significant differences in the rest of the subscales. These results suggest that United States deconverts tend to associate personal gains with their transformation, whereas German deconverts are more likely to report losses and perhaps a mild crisis (Paloutzian et al., 2013). These data illustrate trends characteristic of adults. Adolescents have not yet been studied, and yet the deconversion processes – e.g., intellectual doubts, moral criticism, or disaffiliation from the community – are especially common in adolescence (Hood et al., 2018; Streib & Keller, 2004). Moreover, most studies on deconversion have been conducted by

sociologists using participant observation or descriptive research strategies. Additionally, assessment has been carried out via interviews either structured or open-ended, with former members (Hood et al., 2018). Thus, deconversion is not only a sociological but also a psychological phenomenon, and in this sense it is a gradual one, spread out over time, preceding the very fact of disaffiliation.

A substantial body of literature suggests that religiousness can serve to promote positive mental health outcomes, as well as what is commonly referred to as thriving in adolescence (King et al., 2013). However, when the adolescent religious development goes awry negative psychological and social outcomes arise. For example, experience of religious struggle (Exline et al., 2000) or maladaptive forms of religious coping (Pargament et al., 1998) may result in higher levels of emotional distress, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, and damaging physical and psychological symptoms. Since the loss of religious faith is a vital factor in the portrayal of deconversion, the question arises: Are deconversion processes related to adolescents' quality of life and what is the mechanism that links deconversion processes to such quality of life?

### **Adolescent quality of life**

The term *quality of life* (QoL) combines objective, quantifiable elements, and subjective, experiential aspects (Gander et al., 2019). The objective assessment of QoL focuses on what the individual can do and is important in defining the degree of health. The subjective assessment of QoL includes the meaning to the individual and involves the translation or appraisal of the more objective measurement of health status into the experience of QoL (Eiser, 2001). Many researchers prioritize subjective aspects of QoL over its purely objective indicators (Losada-Puente et al., 2020). There is also an increasing agreement that QoL is a multidimensional construct, which refers to the set of factors composing personal well-being: interpersonal relations, social inclusion, personal development, physical well-being, self-determination, material well-being, emotional well-being, and rights (Schalock, 2004). Although the number and configuration of these core dimensions varies slightly among investigators, there is a good agreement about their generality (Schalock, 2000). In contrast to QoL domains, "core quality of life indicators" should be thought of as QoL domain specific perceptions, behaviors, or conditions that give an indication of the person's well-being (Losada-Puente et al., 2020; Schalock, 2004). Thus, a person's measured level of satisfaction is the most commonly used dependent measure in evaluating his or her perceived QoL (Schalock, 2000). Therefore, it is increasingly necessary to include subjective indicators or elements that describe the individual's perception of QoL. Although QoL is fundamental in all contexts of human activity and throughout the life cycle, it is especially relevant in adolescence. Adolescent QoL takes into account specific aspects, which the World Health Organization indicated as important in this developmental stage (Oleś, 2010), e.g., friends, family, school, financial resources, social belonging, future, health, competence, and safety. In this research, we included four aspects of adolescent QoL distinguished by Schalock and Keith (1993): satisfaction, competence, independence, and social belonging.

### **Religious changes in Poland**

Poland has experienced broad-based and substantial decreases in church attendance and religious interest since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2018, the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) in Poland reported a decline in the level of religiosity of young people. Fewer and fewer individuals are defining themselves as believers and rarely participate in religious practices; they are also clearly less religious than older Poles. In 2018, 63% of students in the final grades of secondary schools defined themselves as believers, compared to 81% in 2008. However, the group of nonbelievers is growing, from 5% in 1996 to 10% in 2013, 13% in 2016, and 17% in 2018. People are more infrequently participating in religious practices, such as mass, religious services, or religious meeting. In 2018, 65% of students in the final grades of secondary schools attended religious services, compared to 84% in 2008. At the same time, the group of non-attenders is growing, from 16% in 2008 to 23% in 2013, 29%

in 2016, and 35% in 2018. The number of young people attending religious class is also decreasing. In 2010, 93% of students attended religious class, compared to 70% in 2018. Most research findings suggest that, in general, adolescents are less religious than middle and older adults in Poland (Mariański, 2011, 2016; Zarzycka, 2009; Zarzycka & Rydz, 2014a, 2014b), and a significantly higher percentage in this group does not participate in religious activities – 35% of adolescents compared to 11% of the general population (CBOS, 2018) – such as mass or religious service. Questioning religion by youth is expressed in a variety of ways, e.g., rebellion against the existing order, changing religious affiliation, adopting a rationalist attitude toward life, or completely rejecting all religiousness from their lives (Mariański, 2016).

### **The present study**

Since the previous research identified that various positive mental health benefits are derived from religiousness, for example, through coping mechanisms or religious social support, deconversion processes – as they are associated with decreased religious faith – may detract from one's coping ability, resulting in a lower QoL (Hood et al., 2018). Based on these research findings, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1:* Deconversion processes are negatively related to adolescent QoL.

Park and Slattery (2013, p. 547) developed a conceptual model of the mediational pathways through which various dimensions of religiousness may help or hinder mental health. They indicated social support to be one of the most obvious mechanisms through which religiousness may affect mental health. A significant body of research documents that religion may be particularly effective in offering social support that is especially important to adolescent well-being (King et al., 2013; Miller & Gur, 2002; Pearce et al., 2003). Religiously engaged youth reported significantly higher levels of social resources than less active youth (King & Furrow, 2004). Following the literature on religious socialization, we focused on three *agents* of socialization that are particularly important in adolescence: family, peers, and significant others (Hood et al., 2018). We predict that they can also affect adolescent QoL while their religious development goes awry. Thus, during deconversion processes adolescents may be particularly likely to seek out support and assistance from their family, friends, or significant others. Therefore, three social support resources – from family, friends, and significant others – will be analyzed as mediators in the relationship between deconversion processes and adolescent QoL. While adolescents experience deconversion processes – abandoning faith, in particular – they may have a sense of lower support from family, and this can lower their QoL. However, criticizing moral rules which are taught by religion can be a predictor of social integration, because it can be a source of social support from friends. Based on a theoretical framework and research findings, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 2:* The relationship between deconversion processes and adolescent quality of life is mediated by social support.

## **Materials and methods**

### **Participants and procedure**

Participants were 272 adolescents aged between 14 and 18 ( $M = 15.74$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). Women constituted 68.4% of the sample. All the participants were Caucasians with Polish nationality. Participants declared their religious affiliation, religious background, and subjective religiosity. Most participants were Roman Catholics ( $n = 229$ , 83.8%); the remaining religious denominations were as follows: Protestant ( $n = 1$ , 0.4%), Jehovah's Witness ( $n = 1$ , 0.4%), and Buddhist ( $n = 1$ , 0.4%). Eleven respondents declared themselves as agnostics (4%), 20 as atheists (7.4%), and 10 did not identify

themselves with organized religion (3.6%). In regard to religious background, most participants were brought up as Roman Catholics ( $n = 257$ , 94.5%); the remaining religious settings were as follows: Jehovah's Witnesses ( $n = 2$ , 0.7%), and Greek Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam and other religions possessed 1 individual each (0.4%); 10 respondents declared that they were raised outside any religious context. The participants had the following attitudes toward religion: 7.4% ( $n = 20$ ) described themselves as very religious; 51.1% ( $n = 139$ ) as religious, and 17.3% ( $n = 47$ ) as weakly religious; religiously indifferent people constituted 8.1% of the sample ( $n = 22$ ); 2.9% described themselves as non-religious ( $n = 8$ ), 5.9% as agnostics ( $n = 16$ ), 6.6% as atheists ( $n = 18$ ), and 0.7% did not choose any attitude toward religion given ( $n = 2$ ). Most of the respondents ( $n = 219$ , 80.5%) declared that they had never changed their religion. Among those who changed their religious affiliation, 40 individuals (14.7%) did it once, 12 (4.4%) a few times, and 1 respondent (0.4%) many times. Participants also rated their parents' religious affiliations and religious attitudes. Table 1 shows all the participants' characteristics.

## Measures

### Adolescent deconversion scale

Deconversion was measured with the 23-item Adolescent Deconversion Scale (ADS) (Nowosielski & Bartczuk, 2017). The theoretical basis of the ADS is deconversion theory (Streib et al., 2009). The ADS consists of five subscales, which measure the following processes of deconversion: Abandoning Faith (AF, 6 items, e.g., *I have begun to doubt that God exists*), which indicates an intensification of doubts and thoughts of abandoning faith for agnosticism or atheism; Withdrawal from the Community (WFC, 7 items, e.g., *The religious community (Church) is becoming less and less important to me*), which indicates losing the bond with the current group of fellow believers; Experiencing Transcendental Emptiness (ETE, 6 items, e.g., *I have begun to experience emptiness in my religious life*), which indicates an intensification of unpleasant emotional states, such as emptiness, a sense of rejection, and sorrow, as well as existential difficulties connected with religion; Moral Criticism (MC, 4 items, e.g., *I cease to understand why – according to religion – I cannot live the way I want to*), which indicates a rejection of the moral principles taught by religion; and Deconversion Behavior (DB, 5 items, e.g., *I rarely attend religious/spiritual services*), which indicates a gradual neglect or abandonment of religious activity. The ADS subscales do not reflect all five deconversion elements by Streib and Keller (2004). Disaffiliation from the community and moral criticism have been distinguished clearly. On the other hand, the other dimensions – loss of religious experiences, intellectual doubt, and emotional suffering – have merged into abandoning faith and transcendental emptiness, which have a more individual character. This structure has been confirmed as reflecting a developmental pattern of adolescence (Nowosielski & Bartczuk, 2017). Deconversion Behavior is a new dimension added by the authors to the revised version of ADS. The response options ranged from 0 (*completely untrue of me*) to 3 (*very true of me*). The period that the participants took into account when assessing the changes in their religiosity was set at 12 months prior to the study. The reliability of ADS calculated by the Cronbach- $\alpha$  ranged from .85 (ETE and MC) to .89 (AF and WFC), with .94 for the total score (Deconversion). Since  $\alpha$  is not an optimal measure of reliability (Hayes & Coutts, 2020), McDonald's omega was calculated in this study. The reliability coefficients ranged from .83 (ETE) to .89 (MC and DB), with .94 for the total score (Table 2).

### The multidimensional scale of perceived social support

Social support was measured by the Polish adaptation (Buszman & Przybyła-Basista, 2017) of the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988). The MSPSS consists of three subscales, which measure perceived social support from family (e.g., *I get the emotional help and support I need from my family*), friends (e.g., *I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows*), and significant others (e.g., *There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows*). The response options were from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the participants.

	N	%
Sex		
Female	186	68.4
Male	86	31.6
Religious Affiliation		
Roman Catholic	228	83.8
Protestant	1	0.4
Jehovah's Witness	1	0.4
Buddhist	1	0.4
Agnostic	11	4.0
Atheist	20	7.4
None	8	2.9
Other	2	0.7
Religious Education		
Roman Catholic	257	94.5
Greek Catholic	1	0.4
Orthodox	1	0.4
Protestant	1	0.4
Jehovah's Witness	2	0.7
Muslim	1	0.4
Agnosticism	3	1.1
Atheism	2	0.7
None	4	1.5
Other	1	0.4
Subjective Religiosity		
Very religious	20	7.4
Religious	139	51.1
Little religious	47	17.3
Neutral	22	8.1
Non-religious	8	2.9
Agnostics	16	5.9
Atheist	18	6.6
Other	2	0.7
Mother's Religious Affiliation		
Roman Catholic	258	94.9
Greek Catholic	1	0.4
Orthodox	1	0.4
Protestant	1	0.4
Jehovah's Witness	1	0.4
Muslim	1	0.4
Buddhist	1	0.4
Agnostics	2	0.7
Atheism	4	1.5
None	2	0.7
Father's Religious Affiliation		
Roman Catholic	246	90.4
Protestant	1	0.4
Pentacostalist	1	0.4
Jehovah's Witness	1	0.4
Muslim	1	0.4
Agnostic	3	1.1
Atheism	9	3.3
None	5	1.8
Other	5	1.8
Family Material Status		
Very bad	9	3.3
Bad	3	1.1
Rather bad	7	2.6
Rather good	63	23.2
good	135	49.6
Very good	55	20.2
Mother's Religiosity		
Very religious	59	21.7
Religious	144	52.9

*(Continued)*



**Table 1.** (Continued).

	N	%
Little religious	44	16.2
Neutral	9	3.3
Non-religious	4	1.5
Agnostics	4	1.5
Atheist	5	1.8
Other	3	1.1
Father's Religiosity		
Very religious	31	11.4
Religious	116	42.6
Little religious	75	27.6
Neutral	23	8.5
Non-religious	8	2.9
Agnostics	4	1.5
Atheist	9	3.3
Other	6	2.2
Place of residence		
Village	122	44.9
City or town < 200,000 people	66	24.3
City > 200,000 people	84	30.9

psychometric properties of the Polish MSPSS were satisfactory: .91 (Family), .93 (Friends), .86 (Significant Other), and .89 (total score). The reliability calculated by McDonald's omega ranged from .88 (Significant others) to .93 (Friends, Family) in this sample (Table 2).

### **Quality of life questionnaire for children and adolescents**

Adolescent QoL was measured by Schalock and Keith (1993) Quality of Life Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (QLQCA) in a Polish adaptation by Oleś (2010). Forty items of the QLQCA were used which were divided into four subscales (of 10 items each): (1) Satisfaction – the individual's overall level of satisfaction with life, including family, relations with relatives, life situation, achievements, and also experiencing positive feelings and problems (exemplary item: *How much fun and enjoyment do you get out of life?*); (2) Competence/Productivity – the level of satisfaction with learning progress, abilities, acquired skills, school situation, and teacher-student relations (*How high do you rate your skills related to school education?*); (3) Empowerment/Independence – degree of autonomy, ability to decide on everyday matters according to age (e.g., small expenses, leaving the house) (*Do your parents let you go out somewhere?*); and (4) Social Belonging/Community Integration – a sense of belonging to and relationship with a peer group, spending free time, and participating in social life (*How satisfied are you with the organizations you belong to?*). Each item has three response options scored from 1 to 3. The reliability of the QLQCA calculated by means of Cronbach's alpha were from .69 (Empowerment/Independence) to .84 (Competence/Productivity) (Oleś, 2010). In this sample, reliability for the QLQCA calculated by the McDonald's omega was satisfactory for the Satisfaction, Competence/Productivity, and Social Belonging/Community Integration subscales (Table 2). The Empowerment/Independence subscale had low reliability (.47) and removing any item did not improve its reliability, therefore we removed the subscale from further analysis.

### **Procedure**

The study was part of a project entitled "Deconversion processes in youth: Personality and social predictors of abandoning faith, its consequences in quality of life in youth," carried out with a grant funded by the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. The study was conducted in 2019 in high schools in Lublin by two students at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin as part of their M.



**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and correlations between the variables included in the study.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 WFC	—										
2 AF	.63***	—									
3 MC	.69***	.68***	—								
4 ETE	.59***	.55***	.61***	—							
5 BD	.80***	.43***	.54***	.56***	—						
6 Friends	.10	.04	.09	-.07	.06	—					
7 Family	-.13*	-.20***	-.16*	-.22**	-.11	.42***	—				
8 Significant Others	.04	-.02	.07	-.09	.01	.72***	.43***	—			
9 Satisfaction	-.09	-.11	-.15*	-.30***	-.07	.31***	.52***	.30***	—		
10 Competence	-.09	-.11	-.15*	-.20*	-.03	.07	.33***	.09	.50***	—	
11 Social Belonging	.09	.03	.17**	-.08	.03	.52***	.28***	.40***	.50***	.24***	—
M	1.03	0.54	0.89	0.69	1.08	5.47	5.10	5.54	2.13	2.25	2.27
SD	0.93	0.75	0.85	0.73	0.96	1.37	1.36	1.38	0.33	0.29	0.33
Skewness (SE)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)	0.67(.15)
Kurtosis (SE)	-0.74(.29)	1.57(.29)	-0.12(.29)	0.44(.29)	-0.93(.29)	1.24(.27)	-0.39(.27)	0.46(.27)	-0.15(.24)	0.24(.24)	-0.01(.24)
McDonald's $\omega$	.87	.88	.89	.83	.89	.93	.93	.88	.74	.69	.65

Note: \* WFC – Withdrawal From the Community; AF – Abandoning Faith; MC – Moral Criticism; ETE – Experiencing Transcendental Emptiness; BD – Deconversion Behavior;  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$

A. program under the supervision of the article's first author. We tested a total of 12 classes from 1st through 3rd grades (the age range was 14 to 18). Four high schools were included in the study distribution, all of which were located in an urban area within Poland. A letter to school principals seeking permission for their schools' participation in the research was provided. The study was conducted over a period of a month on a group basis (during class); it took 40 minutes for students to complete a set of questionnaires. Respondents provided informed consent. All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. The procedure was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Psychology at the authors' university.

### **Data analysis**

The analyses were conducted in the following order. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and McDonald's omega reliabilities) were calculated for all study variables. Second, to test the links between deconversion processes, social support, and adolescent QoL, a correlational analysis was performed. Third, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed to examine each aspect of the adolescents' QoL from the five ADS and three MSPSS subscales entered together. Age and sex were entered into the model as control variables. Our aim was to evaluate whether each of the ADS and MSPSS subscales would predict unique variance (beyond the roles of age, sex, and the other subscales) in the indicators of adolescents' QoL. There were no issues of multicollinearity, i.e., no variance inflation factors (VIF) greater than 5 and tolerance values lower than 0.10 (Hair et al., 2010). The highest VIF was 4.45 and the lowest tolerance was 2.23. Based on the regression analysis results, we predicted several of the mechanisms, which could explain the relationships between deconversion processes and QoL. To this purpose, three separate mediation models were tested to assess the direct and indirect effects of deconversion – faith abandoning, existential emptiness, and moral criticism – on QoL aspects mediated through social support – from family and friends. We performed all mediation analyses using SPSS's add-on process developed by Hayes (2018). Standardized indirect effects and bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI 95%) were calculated using bootstrapping procedures for each of the 5,000 bootstrapped samples.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics and the Spearman correlations for each of the study variables are reported in Table 2. On the basis of kurtosis and skewness values, all variables had non-normal distributions. The mean scores on the ADS subscales were positively skewed (from 0.51 DB to 1.54 AF) with more low values. The mean score in the MSPSS (from -1.12 Friends to -0.62 Family Support) and QLQCA subscales (from -0.45 Social Belonging to -0.17 Competence) were negatively skewed, with more high values. All the coefficients of skewness were around one; thus, the skewness was not strong enough and can be ignored. The values of kurtosis are also within the acceptable range.

Two sets of correlational findings are particularly relevant to the purpose of the study. First, the two deconversion subscales – Moral Criticism and Existential Emptiness – were negatively correlated with Satisfaction and Competence, whereas Moral Criticism was positively correlated with Social Belonging. Second, Withdrawal from the Community, Abandoning Faith, Moral Criticism, and Existential Emptiness correlated negatively with Family Support. Thus, as deconversion processes become stronger the adolescents' sense of family support and QoL decrease. Neither the support of friends nor significant others was correlated with the ADS subscales.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if the deconversion processes and social support sources significantly predicted adolescent QoL. Three 3-stage hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted, with three dimensions of QoL as dependent variables – satisfaction, competence/productivity, and social belonging/community integration. Age and sex were entered at stage one of the

regression to control for demographic characteristics of the respondents. The deconversion processes – withdrawal from the community, abandoning faith, moral criticism, existential emptiness, and deconversion behavior – were entered at stage two, and social support – from friends, family, and significant others – at stage three. The deconversion and social support variables were entered in this order as it seemed chronologically plausible given that deconversion processes came prior to the support seeking; this occurs once a person experiences deconversion processes. Intercorrelations between the multiple regression variables were reported in Table 2 and the regression statistics are in Tables 3–5.

Prior to conducting a hierarchical multiple regression, the relevant assumptions of this statistical analysis were tested. An examination of correlations (see Table 2) revealed that no independent variables were highly correlated. The exceptions were withdrawal from the community, deconversion behavior, and abandoning faith, in addition to support from significant others and from friends. However, as the collinearity statistics (i.e., Tolerance and VIF) were all within the accepted limits, the assumption of multicollinearity was deemed to have been met (Hair et al., 2010).

The first hierarchical multiple regression with satisfaction as dependent variable revealed that, at stage one, age contributed significantly to the regression model,  $F(2,263) = 3.98, p = .020$ . Introducing the deconversion variables explained an additional 9% of variation in satisfaction and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(7,256) = 5.19, p < .001$ . It was found that existential emptiness significantly predicted satisfaction ( $\beta = -.39, t = -4.91, p < .001$ ). Adding social support variables to the regression model explained an additional 27% of the variation in satisfaction and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(10,255) = 16.59, p < .001$ . When all independent variables were included in stage three of the regression model, the most important predictors of satisfaction were family support ( $\beta = .47, t = 8.32, p < .001$ ), existential emptiness ( $\beta = -.33, t = -4.75, p < .001$ ), abandoning faith ( $\beta = -.24, t = 3.19, p = .002$ ), age ( $\beta = -.13, t = -2.53, p = .012$ ), and sex ( $\beta = .11, t = 2.14, p = .034$ ). Taken together, the four independent variables accounted for 37% of the variance in satisfaction. A summary of the regression analysis for variables predicting satisfaction are reported in Table 3.

We predicted that the relationships between abandoning faith and satisfaction, as well as between existential emptiness and satisfaction, were mediated by family support. Two mediation analyses were performed to examine this relation. First, abandoning faith was tested as a predictor of adolescents' satisfaction with life, with family support as a mediator. As Figure 1 illustrates, the standardized

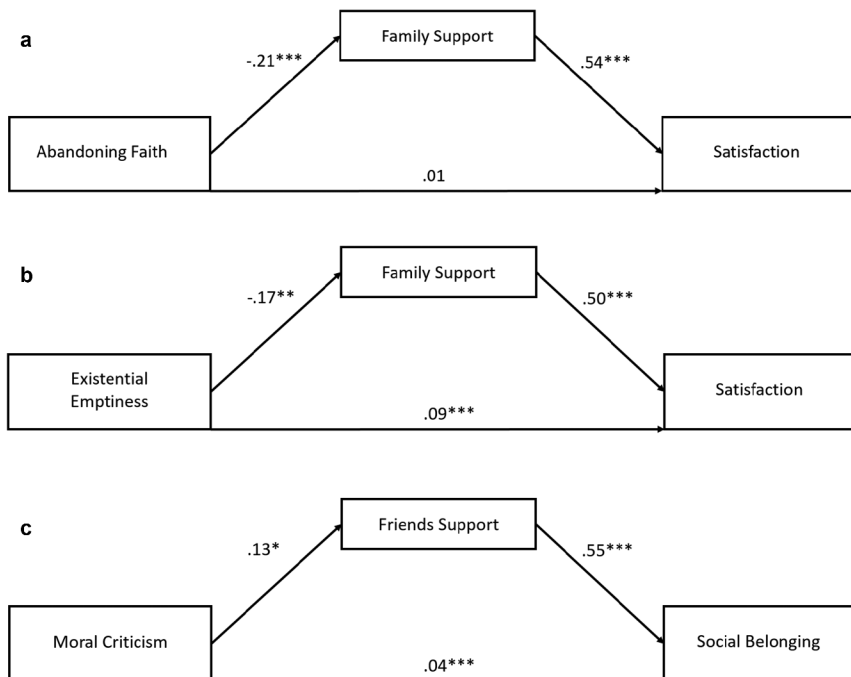
**Table 3.** Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting satisfaction.

Stage	Variable	$\beta$	t	SE	p
1	(Constant)		9.96	.28	.000
	Age	-.16	-2.67	.02	.038
	Sex	.04	1.06	.04	.284
2	(Constant)		9.92	.29	.000
	Age	-.15	-2.50	.02	.053
	Sex	.05	0.78	.04	.345
	Withdrawal from the Community	.11	0.87	.04	.532
	Abandoning Faith	.13	1.47	.04	.318
	Moral Criticism	-.03	-0.30	.04	.627
	Existential Emptiness	-.40	-4.91	.04	.000
	Deconversion Behavior	.01	0.13	.04	.783
3	(Constant)		7.28	.26	.000
	Age	-.13	-2.53	.02	.055
	Sex	.11	2.14	.04	.023
	Withdrawal from the Community	-.03	-0.27	.04	.919
	Abandoning Faith	-.24	3.19	.03	.009
	Moral Criticism	-.07	-0.86	.03	.276
	Existential Emptiness	-.33	-4.75	.03	.000
	Deconversion Behavior	.07	0.73	.03	.395
	Friends Support	.01	0.10	.02	.495
	Family Support	.47	8.32	.01	.000
	Significant Others Support	.13	1.82	.02	.146

regression coefficient between faith abandonment and family support was statistically significant ( $-.21, p < .001$ ), as was the standardized regression coefficient between family support and satisfaction ( $.54, p < .001$ ). The standardized indirect effect was  $IE = -.11$  and the 95% confidence interval ranged from  $-.173$  to  $-.045$ . Thus, the indirect negative effect was statistically significant. The direct effect of faith abandonment on satisfaction was insignificant ( $DE = .01 [-.026, .047]$ ); it was fully mediated. Thus, abandoning faith weakens adolescents' satisfaction with life, because it reduces the feeling of support from their families.

Next, existential emptiness was tested as a predictor of adolescents' satisfaction with life, with family support as a mediator. As Figure 1 illustrates, the standardized regression coefficient between existential emptiness and family support was statistically significant ( $-.17, p = .005$ ), as was the standardized regression coefficient between family support and satisfaction ( $.50, p < .001$ ). The standardized indirect effect was  $-.08$  and the 95% confidence interval ranged from  $-.144$  to  $-.026$ . Thus, the indirect negative effect was statistically significant. The direct effect of existential emptiness on satisfaction was also significant ( $DE = -.09 [-.134, -.040]$ ); this mediation was partial. Similarly to abandoning faith, existential emptiness weakens adolescents' satisfaction with life, because it reduces the feeling of support from their families.

The second hierarchical multiple regression with competence as the dependent variable revealed that, at stage one, age contributed significantly to the regression model,  $F(2,263) = 3.68, p = .026$ . Introducing the deconversion variables explained an additional 2% of variation in competence but this change in  $R^2$  was insignificant,  $F(7,258) = 1.89, p = .072$ . Adding social support variables to the regression model explained an additional 8% of the variation in competence and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(10,255) = 3.73, p < .001$ . When all independent variables were included in stage three of the regression model, the most important predictor of competence was family support ( $\beta = .30$ ,



**Figure 1.** Standardized regression coefficients for the relationships between deconversion processes – Abandoning faith (A), Existential emptiness (B), and Moral criticism (C) – and adolescents quality of life dimensions – satisfaction (A, B) and Social belonging (C), as mediated by family or friends support.

$t = 4.48, p < .001$ ), accounting for 9.3% of the variance in competence. Deconversion processes did not contribute to adolescents' competence/productivity. A summary of the regression analysis for variables predicting competence are reported in Table 4.

The third hierarchical multiple regression with social belonging as the dependent variable revealed that, at stage one, neither age nor sex contributed significantly to the regression model,  $F(2,263) = 0.74, p = .480$ . Introducing the deconversion variables explained an additional 6% of the variation in social belonging and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(7,258) = 2.67, p = .011$ . Adding social support variables to the regression model explained an additional 29% of the variation in social belonging and this change in  $R^2$  was significant,  $F(10,255) = 14.00, p < .001$ . When all independent variables were included in stage three of the regression model, the most important predictors of social belonging were support from friends ( $\beta = .48, t = 6.44, p < .001$ ) and moral criticism ( $\beta = .18, t = 2.32, p = .021$ ). Taken together, the two independent variables accounted for 33% of the variance in social belonging. A summary of the regression analysis for variables predicting social belonging is reported in Table 5.

Based on the regression analysis results, we predicted that the relationship between moral criticism and social belonging was mediated by support from friends. As Figure 1 illustrates, the standardized regression coefficient between moral criticism and support from friends was statistically significant ( $.13, p = .036$ ), and the standardized regression coefficient between support from friends and social belonging was also significant ( $.55, p < .001$ ). The standardized indirect effect was  $.07$  and the 95% confidence interval ranged from  $.009$  to  $.131$ . Thus, the indirect positive effect was statistically significant. Thus, moral criticism strengthens adolescents' social belonging, because it enhances the feeling of support from their friends. The direct effect of moral criticism on social belonging was also significant ( $DE = .04 [.001, .077]$ ) after controlling support from friends; the mediation was partial.

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to assess the relationships between deconversion processes, social support, and QoL in adolescents. Five processes of deconversion (abandoning faith, withdrawal from the community, experiencing transcendental emptiness, moral criticism, and deconversion behavior) and three dimensions of QoL (satisfaction, competence/productivity, and social belonging/

**Table 4.** Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting competence.

Stage	Variable	$\beta$	t	SE	p
1	(Constant)		11.70	.24	.000
	Age	-.17	-2.71	.02	.007
	Sex	-.01	-0.39	.04	.969
2	(Constant)		11.36	.26	.000
	Age	-.17	-2.67	.02	.008
	Sex	-.01	-0.20	.04	.840
	Withdrawal from the Community	.05	0.40	.04	.688
	Abandoning Faith	.09	0.99	.04	.321
	Moral Criticism	-.13	-1.39	.03	.166
	Existential Emptiness	-.11	-1.31	.03	.192
	Deconversion Behavior	-.02	0.21	.03	.834
3	(Constant)		9.72	.27	.000
	Age	-.16	-2.54	.02	.012
	Sex	-.01	-0.10	.04	.919
	Withdrawal from the Community	-.02	-0.17	.04	.864
	Abandoning Faith	.17	1.85	.04	.066
	Moral Criticism	-.13	-1.42	.03	.156
	Existential Emptiness	-.10	-1.25	.03	.212
	Deconversion Behavior	.01	0.07	.03	.945
	Friends Support	-.15	-1.69	.02	.093
	Family Support	.30	4.48	.02	.000
	Significant Others Support	.07	0.88	.02	.379

**Table 5.** Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting social belonging.

Stage	Variable	$\beta$	t	SE	p
1	(Constant)		9.04	.28	.000
	Age	-.05	-0.87	.02	.384
	Sex	-.05	-0.80	.04	.426
2	(Constant)		8.60	.29	.000
	Age	-.05	-0.88	.02	.381
	Sex	-.04	-0.58	.04	.566
	Withdrawal from the Community	.10	0.75	.05	.453
	Abandoning Faith	-.01	-0.12	.04	.906
	Moral Criticism	.28	2.99	.04	.003
	Existential Emptiness	-.22	-2.62	.04	.009
	Deconversion Behavior	-.08	-0.69	.04	.494
3	(Constant)		6.04	.27	.000
	Age	-.05	-0.97	.01	.331
	Sex	.09	1.74	.04	.082
	Withdrawal from the Community	.02	0.19	.04	.851
	Abandoning Faith	-.01	-0.12	.03	.909
	Moral Criticism	.18	2.32	.03	.021
	Existential Emptiness	-.08	-1.12	.03	.265
	Deconversion Behavior	-.06	-0.67	.03	.504
	Friends Support	.48	6.44	.02	.000
	Family Support	.04	0.71	.01	.477
	Significant Others Support	.09	1.21	.02	.226

community integration) were examined. Different types of social support – from family, friends, and significant others – were tested as mediators in the relationships between deconversion processes and adolescent QoL. This research revealed that abandoning faith and existential emptiness lowered satisfaction with life. Family support was confirmed as a mediator in the abandonment of faith/existential emptiness–satisfaction link. At the same time, we found that moral criticism is positively related to social belonging as a QoL dimension and support from friends was confirmed as a mediator in this relationship.

The negative associations between the abandonment of faith and existential emptiness with adolescent satisfaction highlights that deconversion processes hold significant negative implications for adolescent QoL. However, the positive association between moral criticism and social belonging suggests that deconversion can also have a positive influence on adolescent QoL, being a source of social integration. As Streib et al. (2009) revealed, there are cultural differences in the experience of deconversion – for Americans deconversion was a growth-oriented process, whereas for Germans it was a kind of mild crisis (Paloutzian et al., 2013). Our results suggest that various deconversion processes can differently affect adolescent QoL even in the same cultural background. In particular, the abandonment of faith and existential emptiness were experienced as personal losses, whereas moral criticism was a personal gain.

The results suggest that there are two significant mediators in the deconversion-QoL link – support from family and friends. This is not surprising since a significant body of research documents that religious influence might be understood by the network of relationships (Hood et al., 2018; King et al., 2013; Ozorak, 1996), with parents and peers being the most powerful factors affecting children and adolescents' religiousness (Francis, 1993; Hunsberger, 1983, 1985; King & Furrow, 2002). What is surprising is that our results suggest two mechanisms explaining the relationships between deconversion processes and adolescent QoL, using support from family and friends as mediators, respectively. The first mechanism is typical of abandoning faith and existential emptiness – when adolescents are experiencing thoughts of abandoning faith or having a sense of existential emptiness they do not feel supported by their family, which in turn weakens their satisfaction with life. A different mechanism refers to moral criticism – when adolescents criticize or reject the moral principles taught by their religion, they feel supported by their friends, which strengthens their sense of belonging to a peer

group. Thus, while struggling with abandoning their faith or existential emptiness, adolescents feel unsupported by their family, whereas while criticizing moral principles taught by their religion adolescents feel supported by their friends. These two mechanisms have contrasting effects on adolescents' QoL.

Although abandoning faith and existential emptiness reflect similar patterns of mediation effects, their understanding can differ. Abandoning faith is a process, which describes religious doubts or thoughts of renouncing faith for agnosticism or atheism. Young people may question or even abandon their religion as a form of protest or rebellion against the belief system of their family or as a means of individuating or establishing an identity that is more distinct from their family (Kooistra & Pargament, 1999). The process of abandoning faith can be most clearly expressed in reducing or even completely discontinuing religious practices. Because, as many studies suggest (e.g., Francis, 1993; Hunsberger, 1983, 1985), parental influence was greater for overt religiosity (i.e., church attendance) than it was for more covert religiosity (i.e., attitudes toward Christianity), we can assume that parents are to some extent “managers” who control the religious attitudes and practices of their offspring (Hood et al., 2018). When adolescents challenge the family religious beliefs or refuse to participate in religious practices, parents make attempts to keep them within a shared religious system. This can be seen as a lack of understanding of the need of adolescent autonomy, and thus as a lack of parental support, which consequently may contribute to lower satisfaction with life. Thus, conflicts in the family regarding religious matters could explain the relationship between adolescents' faith abandonment and their QoL (Kooistra & Pargament, 1999).

When it comes to understanding the link between existential emptiness and lower satisfaction with life, it should be noted that young people strive to make sense of the world and to assert their own place in it. Religiousness, which locates adolescents within something beyond themselves and affirms their sense of uniqueness and independence, can play a vital role in searching for the meaning of life and the process of striving toward identity cohesion, both of which are crucial to adolescent development (King & Furrow, 2004; King et al., 2013). However, when religion ceases to provide an answer to a question about meaning, a young person can turn away from religion, experiencing an intensification of unpleasant emotional states, such as emptiness and existential difficulties connected with religion. This failure to find the meaning of life in religion is not associated with the general abandonment of the search for meaning, but rather it triggers the search for meaning in other areas of life, such as humanism, in which the focal concerns center around the cultivation of humanity and universal ethics (Koenig et al., 2001). This is in line with what Smith and Denton (2009) noticed as American youth are increasingly identifying themselves as *spiritual, but not religious*. In our studies, religion has been reported as gradually losing its role as a factor shaping the sense of meaning in life for Polish youth. Even if religion can objectively be a point of reference for young people, it does not provide purpose and meaning in everyday life (Mariański, 1998, 2018). Searching for meaning in life is crucial to every person (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Jacobsen, 2007; McAdams, 1993). Considering the fact that it plays an especially important role within adolescent development (King & Furrow, 2004; King et al., 2013), an experience of existential emptiness seems to be extremely difficult in this stage of life. This fact is reflected in the direct negative relationship between the transcendental emptiness as a dimension of deconversion and satisfaction with life (after controlling for support). If, additionally, young people feel that their spiritual search, which is important and difficult for them, does not meet with understanding or support from their family, this leads to a further reduction in their satisfaction with life.

A different pattern of mediation effect refers to moral criticism – when adolescents are criticizing or rejecting the moral principles taught by their religion, they feel supported by their friends, which strengthens their sense of belonging to a peer group. Contemporary Polish youth reveals particularly intense resistance to the institutional Church, and especially to the moral standards taught by the Church. Young people particularly strongly reject the influence of the Church's ethics on sexuality and marital-family morality. Furthermore, extant research clearly points to the far-reaching freedom of young people identifying themselves with Catholicism in applying the Church's moral principles



regarding sexuality (Marianński, 2018; Zarzycka, 2009). Our research shows that the criticism of moral principles taught by religion can become a predictor of social integration among adolescents. Criticizing religious moral principles can gain peer support and, as a consequence, shape a sense of social belonging.

The explanation of the relationship we have observed can be found in classical studies of social psychology, which show that the similarity of attitudes, opinions, and views gives rise to mutual sympathy (Byrne & Nelson, 1965) and in this sense connects people. We like people who think as we do, because they are for us a confirmation of our views and opinions (Clore, 1976). Moreover, if our opinions are not widely shared, we expect that their expression may cause negative feedback from our social environment. This can happen when young people criticize religious principles that are widely accepted by society. The very expectation of a negative evaluation is a form of threat, and a threatening situation intensifies the need for affiliation (Dutton & Aron, 1974; Schachter, 1959), as well as the need to see oneself as a member of the group (Staub, 2014). Since the group provides the individual with support, a sense of strength, security, and integration, the result may be an increase in the QoL in the dimension of social belonging, as we could observe in our study.

### **Limitations of the present study**

In regards to the study's shortcomings, it should be emphasized that the study consisted of a limited sample size and age range, taken from a limited number of high schools, from one country, dominated mostly by Polish Roman Catholics. Therefore, the results require replication in samples including people of different schools, countries, and religious backgrounds. The study was based on individuals' self-reports, and thus the response bias could not be controlled. However, this possibility may be tempered somewhat by the fact that respondents completed the measures anonymously. Therefore, the results need to be replicated with samples where their current shortcomings are minimized.

### **Suggestions for further research**

Deconversion is still a poorly understood phenomenon, especially with regard to adolescents. Therefore, it is worth undertaking further, more extensive research. It would be highly valuable to examine the personality and, above all, identity determinants of the deconversion of young people. The development of identity is particularly intense in adolescence and likely has an impact on the processes of deconversion and the QoL in question. It seems that identity styles may also differentiate the preferable forms of social support, the role of which has been proven in our study. In this context, it is worth examining whether identity is an important moderator of the relationships we describe. Another important field of research on the deconversion of youth is the issues of parental religiosity and the quality of the adolescent's bond with their parents as transmitters of religious faith. It is worth testing whether the deconversion of young people is related to the religiosity of their mothers and fathers and whether the bond with the parents plays a mediating role or acts as a moderator in this relationship. Exploring the issues of deconversion in young people could also take into account their socioeconomic status and/or materialism. Previous studies show that socioeconomic status is related to personal values. Individuals with lower socioeconomic status are characterized by lower levels of Openness to change and higher levels of Conservation (Longest, Hitlin, and Vaisey 2013), which seems to be associated with religious commitment. Based on this, one can reflect on the role of socioeconomic status and/or materialism in the relationship between deconversion and QoL in the group of youth.

In summary, this study aimed to explain the mechanisms behind how deconversion processes affect adolescents' QoL. In light of our findings, we can conclude that deconversion processes can affect adolescents' QoL both negatively and positively. Support from family and friends plays a crucial role in the relationship between deconversion processes and adolescents' QoL. While

experiencing doubts about their faith, youths may not feel supported by their families; however, criticizing moral rules taught by religion can be a predictor of social integration due to peer support.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [BZ], upon reasonable request <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12153/1503>.

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