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The Impact of a Spirituality Interest Group on Counselor Development

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Counselors are their own most sensitive instrument and most powerful tool. But if counselors are unaware of how to use themselves as part of the counseling process, then that “most powerful tool” is likely to become a “most dangerous weapon” (Wren, 1970, p. iv). To be effective, counselors must be open to new ideas, perceptions, attitudes, theories, techniques, and philosophical approaches. Counselors have all learned valuable skills and knowledge in training but must remain open and keep growing. The enemy to openness is encapsulation by counselors surrounding themselves with a protective cover of beliefs, values, attitudes, and concepts that keep their security intact and protect them from the necessity to change, while encouraging rigidity and interfering with seeing others' true selves (Collins, 1987).

Previous authors (e.g., Cashwell & Young, 2005; Stloukal & Wickman, in press) have reported counselors not being able to integrate spirituality into practice because of a lack of their own spiritual development. In essence, counselors who are not congruent with their spiritual dimension cannot use their most powerful tool in counseling: themselves. Paradoxically, those counselors with strong religious convictions and beliefs may have an even more difficult time being open, which could prove dangerous in counseling individuals going through strong emotional and/or spiritual turmoil.

Purpose

This study's purpose was to investigate (a) how participation in a group integrating spirituality and religion with professional counseling affected personal and professional development of master's and doctoral level students in a counseling graduate program and (b) what effect, if any, participating in the group had on their ability to integrate religion and spirituality into their counseling practice. In addition, we were interested in examining how taking part in this two-semester spirituality interest group had changed participants' multicultural awareness and sensitivity in regard to working with clients with different belief systems. We speculated that multicultural awareness and sensitivity would also increase as a result of counselors-in-training honing their own spiritual development in order to help clients do so as well. Our goal was to investigate

whether a group format could impact counselors' personal and professional development, ability to explore inner personal belief systems, grow in their own spiritual development, and, as a result, facilitate client exploration of these same issues.

Spirituality and Religion

Concepts Defined

Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) defined *spirituality* as individuals' belief in the possibility of some form of transcendent reality, including the possibility of experiencing that transcendence in some way. However, Koenig et al.'s definition assumes neither belief in a specific form the transcendent reality takes, a corporate structure, nor a shared set of beliefs. In contrast, Koenig et al. defined *religion* as providing a social context framed by a set of beliefs, practices, and experiences. In effect, religion is more institutional and creedal than spirituality. Whereas religion connotes an organized group with shared beliefs, spirituality connotes an individual focus. The relationship between religion and spirituality is highly personalized. For some people, an organized religion provides a strong context for and deeply enriches their spiritual lives. For others, their spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences may not involve organized religion in any way. Still others participate in organized religious meetings out of a sense of obligation, habit, or fear of consequence for not participating. In many instances, these individuals are religious but not spiritual (Cashwell & Young, 2005).

Importance of Spirituality

Spirituality is viewed as a universal phenomena that acts as a powerful psychological change agent (Hickson, Housely, & Wages, 2000). An abundance of research has found spirituality to be important in grief and loss issues (Abi-Hashem, 1999; Attig, 2001; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), career and decision making (Guindon & Hanna, 2002), and an aid to overcome daily difficulties (Guindon & Hanna, 2002). These findings all imply that counseling professionals need to be equipped to help individuals cope with stress in healthy ways, especially concerning loss. Even social support may not be adequate for healing and spirituality has been found an effective mechanism to help clients during difficult times. Moreover, religion and/or spirituality are indispensable components of personal identity for a large portion of the populations seeking counseling services. For those reasons, ignoring clients' religious and spiritual beliefs can decrease the efficacy of counseling and lead to premature termination as well as devalue or ignore an essential aspect of personal and cultural identity (Curtis & Davis, 1999).

Historical Overview

Understanding the history and evolution of spirituality and religion and their relationship with psychology and counseling is important. Seekers of religious freedom founded the United States, building upon both religious and cultural diversity. Separation of church and state was originally established to avoid the imposition of one church or religion over all others (Cashwell & Young 2005).

Within the history of professional helping, humanistic and transpersonal approaches have contributed to the evolution of counseling's spiritual component (Miller, 1999) and led to the division of the American Counseling Association (ACA) known as

the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC). In contrast, pioneering behavioral theorists like John Watson and B. F. Skinner focused only on what could be seen, touched, and measured. But humanistic psychology founder Abraham Maslow in the 1950s developed a hierarchy of needs, including self-actualization, which had a spiritual component. Maslow later went on to work with Anthony Sutich and Stanislav Grov on transpersonal psychology, which itself started to look at spirituality in counseling as a legitimate aspect of professional inquiry.

A more recent trend that has currently influenced increased attention in counseling and spirituality is multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is central in the work that counselors do (Powers, 2005). In the mid-1970s, religion had been a taboo topic and spirituality seldom mentioned. Graduate students at that time were taught to refer clients who brought up these issues to clergy members (Powers, 2005). Nevertheless, spirituality and counseling articles began to emerge in professional helping publications during this time. Although spirituality was not yet labeled a multicultural concept, Powers believed that the emergence of multicultural counseling came about due to counselors noticing clients having major spiritual issues of concern.

Integration of Spirituality Into Counseling

Walker, Gorsuch, and Tan (2004) performed a meta-analysis of studies examining counselors' reluctance to incorporate religion and spirituality into counseling practice. They found that a majority claimed that spirituality was relevant, but engagement in spiritual practices was infrequent. Whereas two-thirds of Americans consider spiritual practices like prayer an important part of their daily lives, counselors' neglecting or opposing the inclusion of religion and spirituality in counseling is likely because of their own unresolved personal issues (Walker et al., 2004). According to Walker et al., counselors who attempt to incorporate client religious and spiritual concerns into therapeutic work may experience countertolerance to a degree that at best interferes with therapeutic effectiveness or at worst harms clients. Clinical triggers are another concerning issue: Clients may arrive with issues similar to those of their counselor, leading to counselors being more vulnerable to experiencing conflict with client belief systems and religious or cultural differences. Walker et al. also found counselors who had not explored their own beliefs were more likely to have difficulty understanding how such a conflict could lead to maleficence, suggesting counselors may need to consult religious helpers on such issues. Walker et al.'s results also showed some counselors using spiritual techniques in counseling limited to scripture and prayer. Walker et al. attributed counselor difficulty integrating spirituality into counseling to perceptions of (a) conflict between scientific worldviews and those of religion and spirituality, (b) religion and spirituality being linked to pathology, (c) religion and spirituality as the domain of spiritual leaders, (d) lack of training, and (e) and counselors' own religious issues.

Cashwell and Young (2005) argued that creating a safe environment to discuss religion and spirituality is essential, both with clients and with counseling graduate students. Cashwell and Young wrote that counselors-in-training learning to integrate religion and spirituality into counseling practice need to (a) not feel judged, (b) not feel pressured to convert to a particular belief system or practice, (c) have permission to be ignorant about various religions, and (c) feel respected in regard to confidentiality and personal sharing.

Spirituality as a Multicultural Concept

Spirituality, religion, and culture are intertwined and interrelated. Religion and spirituality exist within cultures; that is, few cultures exist without some expressions of religion and spirituality. Culture can be described as both *objective* and *subjective*. *Objective culture* refers to intuitions, systems, artifacts, kinship, and knowledge. *Subjective culture* refers to behavior, communication styles, verbal and nonverbal competencies, and cultural values (Cashwell & Young, 2005). Multicultural learning fosters spiritual evolution, which in turn strengthens the multicultural learning process (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Funderburk & Fukuyama, 2001). Spiritual values like love, compassion, and connectedness help people deal with oppression. Cross-cultural encounters may aid individual spiritual growth by opening and expanding worldview, which may lead to striving for the core ethical ACA spiritual and multicultural value of social justice.

Spirituality in Personal and Professional Development

Prest, Russel, and D'Souza (1999) found about 75% of graduate students surveyed agreeing that spirituality was an influential force in guiding them toward a career in family therapy. Two-thirds of the sample expressed interest in learning about integrating spirituality and religion into the process of clinical assessment and intervention. Seventy-three percent desired to receive supervision and training in dealing with client spiritual issues. Fifty-three percent believed that this type of training should be offered specifically within their graduate program curricula. Ninety-two percent said they had not received any training dealing with integrating spiritual or religious issues within their counseling practice. Cashwell, Bentley, and Bigbee (2007) discussed spiritually oriented counselors sustaining a lifelong commitment to personal wellness, recognizing purpose and sacred connection of each life, and this foundation being built through a combination of an open heart and person-centered nonjudgmental awareness. This type of belief system promotes holistic wellness, offering many opportunities for personal and professional healing and growth.

Method

Origin of Religion and Spirituality Group in Counselor Education Program

Faculty and students in an accredited counselor education program recognized the dilemma of potentially not adequately preparing counselors-in-training to integrate religion and spirituality into counseling practice, due to the program's lack of opportunity for counseling students to develop skills in working within this integral aspect of client identity as well as students' lack of opportunity to integrate their emerging professional development with their own spiritual growth. Consequently, faculty and students created an interest group that met weekly to discuss spirituality and religion as related to counseling, in a safe environment where all program members (master's, doctoral, faculty, alumni) were invited to participate. The current study is an in-depth look at how participation in this group affected (a) members' personal as well as professional development and (b) multicultural awareness (i.e., openness to other's views and beliefs).

This study took place at a large, Midwestern university in an accredited counselor education program. One doctoral and five master's students participated in the group studied, which met for approximately 2.5 hours per week for two semesters. An additional doctoral student and faculty member also participated in the group but subsequently became, respectively, the primary investigator and faculty advisor for this study, so did not participate as interview subjects. Note that as authors we were not aware during the life of the group that we would be conducting this research, but we were inspired to do so based on how personally meaningful the experience had been for us.

Participants

An email was sent out to all master's students, doctoral students, alumni, and faculty members of a counselor education program to participate in an interest group related to religious, spiritual, and ethical issues in counseling and therapy. Master's student participants who responded were at different points in their graduate programs: pre- and post-practicum, internship, and just admitted. Participant ages ranged from mid-twenties to late forties. Four males and two females participated. The interest group's ethnic diversity consisted of three Caucasian males, two Caucasian females, one Jewish male, one African American female, and one African male. Religious backgrounds ranged from one Muslim, two evangelical Christian, one Baptist, one Protestant, one non-practicing Jewish, and two atheist/agnostic members. The group met once a week for two consecutive semesters. The group goals were to give counseling students a place to discuss religious and spiritual issues as related to counseling, without a set structure for any given meeting. Instead, issues arose organically. The group participated in open discourse about issues pertaining to religion and spiritual issues in counseling, and members were encouraged to dialogue about various religious and spiritual perspectives as well as bring in any literature they would like to share on the subject. Some particular group members took it upon themselves to go have a religious experience or participate in a religious or spiritual service or activity different from their own to then discuss in group. The rationale for this type of group was to ascertain student interest level as well as provide a venue for students interested in spiritual and religious issues in counseling to meet and discuss the same. Group membership was voluntary and participants were self-selected. There was no selection or screening process other than being connected to the academic counseling program.

Interviews

The primary investigator interviewed all participants individually in a private location. The interviews took place over a 5 month span, beginning approximately 6 months following participation in the interest group. The interviews ranged from 20-30 minutes and were transcribed by the primary investigator. Transcriptions were coded using Nvivo software, and a second analysis was done by a research group to code interviews. The research group was made up of one faculty member, a doctoral student, and three master's students. The research group received training as a group and then initially did separate coding, coming up with themes and categories, and later achieving consensus on judgments about the meaning of the data, categories, and themes.

Questions. Interview questions were semi-structured, focusing on how people decided to get involved with the interest group and how participation affected their

professional and personal development as counselors in training. Additional questions focused on outstanding positive or negative events during group sessions. Other questions focused on how personal beliefs had been validated, confirmed, or changed from being a part of the shared group experience.

Results

Open coding using Nvivo technology yielded several predominant coding categories:

- *importance of group process*
- *confidence about speaking about religious and spiritual issues with a group of other professionals and with clients*
- *multiculturalism*
- *Christian counselors vs. counselors who are Christian*
- *members challenging each other*
- *empowerment*
- *developing advanced counseling skills*
- *importance of spirituality -- individual level*
- *importance of spirituality within the counseling profession*
- *spiritual and religious issues in counseling not being brought up in classes*

Additionally, predominant words and phrases came up repeatedly through the coding:

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|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • <i>identity</i> | • <i>accepting</i> |
| • <i>assuming</i> | • <i>blaming</i> |
| • <i>challenging</i> | • <i>Christian counselors</i> |
| • <i>comparing</i> | • <i>confidence</i> |
| • <i>confrontation,</i> | • <i>cultural</i> |
| • <i>spiritual issues</i> | • <i>addressing</i> |
| • <i>group process</i> | • <i>importance</i> |
| • <i>interesting</i> | • <i>real life</i> |
| • <i>misunderstood</i> | • <i>not accepting</i> |
| • <i>developing skill</i> | • <i>not brought up in class</i> |
| • <i>passion</i> | • <i>self-awareness</i> |
| • <i>sensitivity</i> | • <i>spiritual growth</i> |

The themes determined by the research group coding and analysis were *growth and development, personal development, spiritual development, multicultural development, professional development, and group process*.

Confidence in Speaking About Religious and Spiritual Issues

Three out of five participants stated they had increased confidence speaking about religious and spiritual issues with their clients as well as developing and practicing skills with clients and in practicum that they developed in the religion, spirituality, and ethics interest group. Myers and Williard (2003) proposed counselors-in-training be given opportunities to explore, understand, and articulate the personal meaning of their own spirituality as well as the individual nature of their meaning-making processes. All

interviewees voiced an understanding that religion and spirituality can be a counselor strength. One participant stated:

I kind of saw going into it as a way to prepare myself and as another angle that I could try to tackle or support clients with. If it is something that means a lot to them, I should be prepared in some way, shape, or form to help them access and use this in a productive way. I also had two clients in practicum that brought up their spiritual or religious sides. It was interesting when we were dealing with it in our groups, but to have it come in a one-on-one therapeutic setting was really different and cool, to have both things going on at the same time. It had a big impact on me.

According to Souza (2002), the consequences of counselors not addressing spiritual issues include (a) possible unethical client treatment by counselors who undervalue spiritual belief systems and (b) failure of counselors to recognize a potentially effective coping skill. Similarly, as part of the interest group, participants did a crosswalk between (a) a school counseling religious safe zones model (Stloukal & Wickman, in press), (b) ASERVIC's (2009) guidelines for spiritually competent counseling, and (c) the ACA (2005) and American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2004) ethical codes. This crosswalk reiterated the importance of adhering to the ASERVIC guidelines as a means for following ethical standards.

Catalyst for Counselor Personal Spiritual Growth and Development

All individuals in the interest group also professed an awareness of the group's importance as a catalyst for spiritual development and growth. One participant stated:

The spiritual piece had a greater impact than I initially realized, in the sense that now in my life I'm realizing that I have no outlet for spirituality, but it's making me think to ignore that piece of myself is in a way limiting me.

Another interviewee disclosed: "(Participating in the group) made me feel stronger in my faith and closer to God personally. I don't know if I was necessarily expecting that benefit."

The interest group provided a safe place to discuss issues with like-minded and not-so-like-minded individuals. Positive outcomes found by participants, as well as proclaimed by Henning and Tirell (1982), were *awareness*, *acceptance*, *ontological (spiritual) growth*, and *integration*. Henning and Tirell also found sources of counselor resistance, such as negative attitudes toward religion in general. As one interviewee said, "a dogma, only one truth... there is no other truth, only theirs." Other negative aspects found by Henning and Tirell that seemed congruent with the interest group were *lack of knowledge*, *fear from expressing incongruent thoughts with own beliefs*, and taking discussions back to safe conversational territory, as they were easier to deal with than anxieties that came from discussing uncomfortable personal topics.

Some group members also exhibited *a priori* dichotomized categories, with religious beliefs falling into one category, for example, that made abortion either *always* or *never* acceptable, divorce being either *okay* or *not*, and gay rights being either something to *promote* or *fight against*. Students were initially concerned about offending others and being judged harshly for their comments. The group format helped to

extinguish those fears. Consistent with Souza's (2002) suggestions, the group created a safe, respectful environment in an academic setting, making into a group norm the expectations that (a) opinions of others are respected, (b) members sometimes disagree, and (c) educator-student and student-student relationships in the group are indicative of how future clients will be treated by current counselors-in-training.

The group format seemed to have a positive impact for one participant, who stated:

I would never have had it come up in conversation causally with these people, and here I was sitting across the table from them and learning about something personal in regard to them. It was a very powerful thing for me to witness, and I felt fortunate to learn from this experience.

Cultural Aspect of Spirituality

Three participants also addressed multiculturalism's predominance in the group's discussions on spirituality and religion. The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (Arredondo et al., 1986) described a culturally competent counselor as respecting client religious or spiritual beliefs and values, including traditions and taboos. Culturally competent counselors not only respect indigenous helping practices but also are not averse to seeking consultation with spiritual healers. According to one participant, "religion permeates society. There are a lot of unspoken rules, a lot of cultural connections. For me, it kind of works right into multiculturalism."

According to Arredondo et al. (1986), because spirituality and religion can be ingrained as doctrine in some, letting go of religion's black and white may require unlearning beliefs and viewpoints that promote unacceptance, judgment, and bias, similar to multicultural counseling. One participant stated: "I think this was one of the sessions that pushed everyone to the outer limits to see what is really going on with them and how closed-minded we all actually really are." Another participant stated: "It made me aware of Christian privilege, sort of in the same vein as white privilege. So, I am not only male, I am a white male and a white Christian male, so being aware of that is huge." Another interviewee stated:

You also need to know yourself, or you should know yourself as best as you can, reinvestigating your own perspectives if you are really going to work with other people and understand their perspectives, whether it relies (on) me staying objective or holding back on things. You need to be self aware, so things don't slip through that shouldn't.

Importance of Class or Curricula in Relation to Addressing Spiritual Development

Another predominant theme was related to spirituality and religion in counseling not being integrated into any of the program's courses, framed by the idea that counselors-in-training should be exposed to many diverse beliefs and values as part of their preparation. Participants believed this process could be greatly facilitated by incorporating a developmental wellness orientation into all core course curricula, including multicultural counseling. Practicum experiences could be combined or coordinated to expose students simultaneously to their own cultural and spiritual development. Kelly (1994) found that a majority of counselor education programs have no course in religious and spiritual issues or other learning activities dealing with

religious and spiritual issues related to counseling. Kelly found programs provide little to no supervision on religious and spiritual issues related to either client or counselor-in-training beliefs. One participant stated:

This topic is not touched on in our classes, and it is super, super important that it is touched in somewhat shape or form in class. We talked about being open to multicultural perspectives, but, in group class, we got to experience (multiculturalism) come to life and the real emotion and power it can bring to an individual and group of people. With the conflict and how you deal with it, it was fascinating to see it in a group come to life.

Need for Additional Research

The theme of research on effective ways to integrate spirituality and religion into counseling also came up as an issue of great importance, and three participants verbalized a desire to do future research in this area. Myers and Williard (2003) proposed that research involving spiritual/religious issues and development should be encouraged and supported by counselor education programs. According to Myers and Willard, master's-level research courses should include current and relevant articles in religion and spirituality, with doctoral level courses specifically emphasizing challenges in this area and the need for future research. Counselor educators-in-training should be encouraged to complete dissertations that present the results of investigations into spiritual and religious issues. According to a review of multicultural training in spirituality by Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti (2006), many accreditation bodies, including the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), are moving toward mandating training programs to infuse spirituality and religion into their counseling curricula. As one participant stated:

Well I really appreciated seeing the kind of passion and level of involvement that people have in addressing issue(s) of religion and spirituality within a counseling focus. I see this as a wave of the future, kind of like of [sic] something that is an issue in the future.

Discussion

Having a safe environment for counselors-in-training to speak about religious and spiritual issues as pertaining to their current and future experiences facilitates confidence in bringing up these issues with clients. Such an environment also enhances professional development and fosters trainees' own spiritual development. Additionally, counselors-in-training need to address their own multicultural competence and not ignore what may be a great strength for clients (religious and spiritual identity). This study's findings also reinforce the need for a religious and spiritual course in counselor education programs. Several participants reported this topic is never being broached in their classes, and that this group had been their only venue to discuss these integral issues.

Broader Significance of Study

Spirituality and religion often are not addressed in counseling sessions with clients due to counselor preparation programs not preparing future counselors to address these issues with their clients. This lack of preparation can lead to a detriment in client

functioning if religion and spirituality are sources of strength and coping for an abundance of clients. Professional counselors who fail to address these important identity constructs for clients are thus partially promoting absence of wellness by ignoring client strength resources.

Limitations

The primary investigator and faculty advisor participated in the group both semesters in the group subsequently studied. Consequently, to minimize researcher bias, we chose not to be interviewed for this study. Nevertheless, the interview process still was impacted by the primary investigator having participated: At times, interviewees would mention an incident in the group, knowing that the interviewer was already familiar with the event to which they were referring. The interviewer then had to ask respondents to elaborate as though she had not been part of the group. Additionally, the interviewer's role at the university was as a doctoral student, which may have affected master's student responses due to an implicit status differential. Moreover, an even greater difference in power existed among all participants and the faculty advisor. However, we believe the interviewees' responses were genuine, especially given that all participants had spoken even more personally, frankly, and openly in the direct presence of the faculty advisor during the group itself.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Counselor Education Programs

Counselor training programs may need some type of class, curriculum, or other opportunity for discourse in religious and spiritual issues related to counseling so that future counselors can explore their own spiritual and religious development and address these same issues with clients when practicing in the field.

Suggestion for Future Research

Although not addressed overtly in this study, we believe group cohesion and the dynamics of interpersonal group process also played an important role in creating a safe-space environment for counselors-in-training to discuss issues related to integrating spirituality and religion into counseling. We also recommend further inquiry into this area, such as more structured pre- and post-group comparisons of the effects on personal and professional development of participating in counselor training on religious and spiritual issues. Another interesting study would compare this pilot study of a focus group in research in spirituality and religion in counseling with other similar groups to see if similar themes are found.

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