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Article 98

Spiritual Integration in Counseling Training: A Study of Students' Perceptions and Experiences

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Recent Gallup Polls continue to indicate the majority of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit (Gallup, 2009; Newport, 2006). In addition, a majority of Americans say that religion is very important or fairly important to their lives (Gallup, 2009; Winseman, 2005). Although decreasing in recent years, a significant number of Americans still believe that religion can answer all or most of their problems (Gallup, 2009; Saad, 2008). However, Steere (1997) describes a trend where many Americans seem to be moving away from traditional religious institutions, yet retaining a sense of spirituality in their lives.

The American Counseling Association code of ethics states "Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, *religion/spirituality* [emphasis added], gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status/partnership, language preference, socioeconomic status, or any basis proscribed by law" (ACA, 2005, Nondiscrimination section). The Summit on Spirituality commenced in 1995 as the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) organization initiated a focus on the integration of spirituality in counselor training (Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, & Belaire, 2002; Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007). A series of summit sessions produced a set of professional competencies for addressing clients' spiritual and religious domains in counseling (ASERVIC, 2009). Subsequently, the Counsel for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) infused spiritual competencies in the accreditation standards for counseling education (CACREP, 2001, 2009).

The distinction between religion and spirituality is often vague for many people. As researchers have increasingly focused on studying the appropriateness and preparedness of mental health professionals for addressing the spiritual and religious domain of clients, several definitions have emerged from these studies. Essentially, religion is defined as a communal practice of shared sacred beliefs, whereas spirituality is defined as a personal experience of seeking meaning and purpose in the sacred domain (Delaney, Miller, & Bisono, 2007; Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007; Sperry, 2001; Young et al., 2007).

The need for counselor education programs to provide training for spiritual/religious integration increases in importance if polls continue to reflect that Americans value a sacred domain in their lives and a desire to address the sacred domain in counseling. Kahle and Robbins (2004) highlight that counselors have the power to help, as well as the power to harm, when incorporating the sacred in counseling sessions. They stress the importance of counselor training that develops competencies for addressing the sacred through learning from research, from clients, and from serious self-reflection. While incompetent application of spiritual or religious integration can be harmful to clients, Hage (2006) also identifies that avoidance and disregard of the client's spiritual or religious resources is also potentially harmful to the therapeutic outcome.

Review Past Research

Numerous studies on the integration of spirituality and religion in counseling and counseling training have been conducted over the past 15-20 years. A national study in 1985 investigated the religious values of a sampling of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, marriage and family therapists, and social workers (Bergin & Jensen, 1990; Jensen & Bergin, 1988). This study determined the professionals' religious preference and involvement tended to fall below the national averages, particularly for clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. The researchers noted that clients may tend to seek help elsewhere when they perceive a therapist does not understand or disregards their perspective about their beliefs.

Delaney et al. (2007) later investigated the spiritual and religious attitudes of a national sampling of clinical and counseling psychologist members of the APA. The study determined that American psychologists continued to be significantly less religious than the population they serve. Psychologists assign greater importance to spirituality than to religion, yet they positively viewed the relationship between religion and mental health. The researchers indicated the need for American psychologists to become well prepared to competently address spiritual and religious diversity with respectful understanding of clients' beliefs.

Kelly (1994) conducted a national survey of a sampling of counselor educators to investigate the extent that spiritual and religious issues were addressed in counselor training. In addition, the study investigated whether counselor training for spiritual and religious issues differed between secular and non-secular educational institutions. Kelly found the majority of counseling programs had little or no content for addressing spiritual or religious issues with clients. Less than half of the respondents considered spiritual and religious integration as important to counselor training. The religious-affiliated training programs were a clear minority of respondents, but the religious-affiliated training

programs had significantly more spiritual and religious content than the secular training programs. Kelly raised the question of adequate preparedness of counselors in training, especially from secular training programs, to address the spiritual and religious domain when counseling clients.

Young et al. (2002) conducted a national survey of a sampling of CACREP-accredited programs to investigate the importance of incorporating the spiritual competencies from the Summit on Spirituality in counselor training. In addition, the study investigated the preparedness of the faculty to infuse the spiritual competencies in their training programs, or whether the faculty believed they needed training to accomplish the spiritual integration. The respondents indicated moderately strong support for training in handling spiritual and religious issues with clients. Approximately half of the respondents reported inclusion of spiritual and religious issues in their training programs, but more than half of the respondents indicated they needed additional training and preparation to infuse the spiritual competencies in their training programs.

Young et al. (2007) later investigated a national sampling of ACA members regarding their level of support and preparedness for integrating the spiritual competencies from the Summit on Spirituality when counseling clients. The majority of respondents considered themselves more spiritual than religious, and respondents provided moderate to high support for the integration of the spiritual competencies in counseling. Study results indicate 68% of respondents agreed with the importance of addressing the spiritual and religious domains in counseling, and the same percentage of respondents felt prepared to address these domains in counseling.

Several surveys were also conducted within the profession of marriage and family therapists. Prest, Russel, and D'Souza (1999) conducted a national survey to investigate the attitudes of a small sampling of graduate students regarding the appropriateness of addressing spirituality and religion in their counseling training and clinical practice. The study measured the students' responses for seven scales: (1) personal importance of spirituality; (2) importance of spirituality for wellness; (3) integration of spirituality within professional practice; (4) education needs for spirituality; (5) relationship between spirituality and professional identity; (6) personal importance of religion; and (7) integration of religion within professional practice. Respondents considered themselves more spiritual than religious, as well as being more accepting of working with clients' spiritual beliefs than with their religious beliefs. A large majority of respondents reported having no training for spiritual or religious integration, yet 72% expressed an interest for receiving training for the integration of spirituality in clinical assessment and intervention.

Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, and Killmer (2002) conducted a similar study with a national sampling of AAMFT members to measure responses for the same seven scales from the Prest et al. (1999) study. The respondents in the Carlson et al. study also considered themselves more spiritual than religious, as well as being more accepting of working with clients' spiritual beliefs than with their religious beliefs. The appropriateness of asking about clients' spiritual and religious domains received moderate to strong support from the respondents. Similar to the Prest et al. study, the respondents in this study expressed a desire to receive training for the integration of spirituality in therapy with clients.

A national study of a sampling of faculty members for marriage and family therapy training was conducted by Grams et al. (2007) to explore beliefs and attitudes about the appropriateness of addressing spirituality in counselor training. The study also investigated whether faculty members considered themselves as spiritual people, and whether their personal view of spirituality predicted the importance of integrating spirituality in the training program. The majority of respondents considered themselves as spiritual people, and a majority agreed that spirituality is important to their professional work. In addition, a majority agreed that spirituality should be integrated into training, yet only 65% reported they had integrated spirituality to some extent into their teaching. The study results appeared to support the expectation that faculty are influenced by their perceived importance of spirituality as to the extent they integrate spirituality into their teaching.

The various studies conducted across the spectrum of psychologists, counselors, and marriage and family therapists demonstrate the increasing attention to spirituality and religion in counseling and counseling training. In summing up the topic of counselor training, Miller (1999) states that “spirituality deserves neither more nor less attention than other important aspects of human nature... To overlook or ignore [spirituality] is to miss an important aspect of human motivation that influences personality, development, relationships, and mental health” (p. 261).

Since prior studies have researched the attitudes and beliefs of counseling educators and members of professional organizations, the purpose of this study was to specifically survey graduate students in both secular and non-secular counseling training programs in various regions of the state of Texas regarding their attitudes and beliefs for integrating spirituality and religion in counseling. The researchers of this study developed a survey to explore the following questions: (1) What are respondents’ attitudes/beliefs about the appropriateness of integrating spirituality or religion in counseling?; (2) How well do respondents feel they are prepared for addressing spirituality or religion when counseling clients?; (3) Do respondents feel they need additional training for addressing spirituality or religion when counseling clients?; and (4) How frequently do respondents address spirituality or religion when counseling clients? For the purpose of this study, spirituality is defined as an individual’s personal encounter with God, or a higher transcendent being; religion is defined more specifically as an individual’s participation within an organized group to encounter God, or a higher transcendent being.

Method

The researchers of this study adopted an electronic survey to accomplish simultaneous data collection, during a short three-week interval, from participants who were geographically dispersed. The researchers preserved privacy and confidentiality by avoiding the collection of any identifying information from participants. Additionally, the electronic survey allowed participants to respond at the time and place most convenient for their schedules during the window of time for the survey.

In contrast to postal-delivered surveys, the benefits of an electronic survey include cost effectiveness, rapid distribution, quick response cycles, automatic response verification, and electronic capturing of responses (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003; Shannon & Bradshaw, 2002). However, lower response rates are typical of electronic

surveys compared to postal-delivered surveys. Some factors that can affect the response rates for electronic surveys are lack of access to the required technology, lack of comfort using technology, concerns about privacy and confidentiality, and undeliverable email addresses that bounce back during delivery. Andrews et al. (2003) suggest that response rates for electronic surveys can be potentially improved when the survey length is shorter; privacy and confidentiality are assured; estimated completion time is provided; survey is provided separately from the email invitation to allow opt-in participation; and follow-up reminders are sent at appropriate intervals. The researchers for this study utilized each of these suggestions in an attempt to enhance the response rate for this electronic survey.

Participants

Since the purpose of this study intended to survey graduate students in counseling training programs, eight universities in various regions of the state of Texas were invited to participate in the study. In order to balance the comparison of attitudes and beliefs between secular and non-secular training programs, four public universities and four private universities were invited to participate in the study. These universities were geographically dispersed across regions of north, west, central, and south Texas. The total estimated population of graduate students across all eight universities was 695, with 60% (415) at the four public universities and 40% (280) at the four private universities.

Measures

This study purposed to survey the attitudes and beliefs of graduate students in counseling training programs regarding the integration of spirituality and religion into counseling and counseling training. Since this study involved cross-sectional comparisons between private and public university training programs, separate collectors were used to capture the responses from the two types of educational institutions. The responses from the collectors were analyzed separately for comparison and then aggregated for overall analysis. Additionally, this study involved cross-sectional comparisons of responses about addressing spirituality and religion in counseling. The survey instrument provided paired questions to facilitate the examination of the difference in attitudes and beliefs for addressing spirituality versus religion for each area of focus in the study: (a) appropriateness, (b) preparedness, and (c) practice.

Materials

The researchers for this study developed a three-part, web-based survey instrument. The first part of the survey presented 5 paired statements related to the appropriateness of spirituality and religion when: (a) performing intake and counseling clients; (b) client or counselor initiates these topics, and (c) addressing these topics in counseling training programs. A Likert rating scale was used for each statement in this part of the survey, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) with 3 as a neutral response.

The second part of the survey addressed the respondent's preparedness and practice for addressing spirituality and religion when counseling clients. Two paired statements were presented for preparedness and the need for additional training. Three questions were presented for the number of training program credit hours received for

counseling and for addressing spirituality and religion in counseling. In addition, a multiple choice question was presented regarding the sources of training for addressing spirituality and religion in counseling, along with an optional write-in comment. Finally, two paired questions were presented regarding the frequency of addressing spirituality and religion in counseling.

The final part of the survey gathered the basic demographic information, such as the type of educational institution where the participant was receiving counseling training, the fields of counseling training, gender, age range, and race. An optional write-in comment was provided for race, and a separate overall write-in comment was provided for any additional comments for the survey.

Procedure

The researchers provided information about the study to the counseling training program director for each of the eight universities invited to participate in this study. Permission was obtained from each counseling training program director, and a contact person for study administration was identified within each training program. The dates of the study window, including the date for distributing the initial email invitation and the follow-up email reminders, were communicated to the university contacts approximately two weeks before the launch of the study.

To preserve privacy and confidentiality of study participants, the email invitations and follow-up reminders were distributed by the university contacts to the graduate students in their respective counseling training programs. The researchers provided the email content to each university contact, including the web link to the survey, but the researchers were not exposed to any email addresses for any of the study participants. In addition, the survey did not collect any personally identifiable information from participants, nor were any internet addresses collected.

Since the study window was only three weeks in duration, the email distribution dates were designated and communicated to each university contact in order to facilitate simultaneous launch, follow-up reminders, and survey closure across all eight universities. Due to the lower response rates typically encountered for electronic surveys, a follow-up reminder was distributed at the mid-point of the three week window and a final reminder approximately three days prior to the close of the survey.

Results

Participation in this study was voluntary. The initial email invitation to 695 students yielded 96 responses in the first week, a 14% overall response rate. The mid-point email reminder prompted a spike of responses and the overall response rate for the study increased to 22%. The final email reminder also prompted another spike of responses, resulting in 193 total responses. Sixty-three percent ($n=121$) of respondents were from the private universities and 37% ($n=72$) of respondents were from the public universities. The response rate from the private university population was 43%, while the response rate from the public university population was only 17%. The overall response rate across all eight universities was 28%. Of the 193 respondents, 97% ($n=187$) completed the entire survey, while only 3% ($n=6$) stopped part-way through the survey.

The survey respondents were predominantly female (82%) and Caucasian (72%) aged 35 and under (61%). Eight respondents elected not to indicate their gender and age range. Other races represented in the responses were Hispanic/Latino/Latina (11%), Black/African American (7%), Biracial/Multiracial (5%), and Asian American (1%). Seven respondents elected not to indicate their race.

Appropriateness

Regarding the appropriateness of integrating spirituality and religion into counseling, this study explored respondents' views for inquiring about the client's spirituality and religion during intake sessions and during counseling. In general, respondents from both private and public university training programs indicated more acceptance for addressing spirituality than religion during intakes and during counseling. As shown in Figure A1, addressing spirituality during counseling was acceptable to 88% of private university respondents and 83% of public university respondents, while 73% in both sets of respondents viewed addressing religion during counseling as acceptable. Compared to the responses for intake sessions, addressing spirituality and religion during counseling sessions was more acceptable to both sets of respondents.

This study also explored the appropriateness of the client versus the counselor initiating discussions about the client's spirituality and religion during counseling sessions. As shown in Figure A1, respondents from both university settings indicated similar levels of acceptance, with client initiation for both topics being more acceptable than counselor initiation of the topics. In addition, the counselor's initiation of discussing the client's spirituality was more acceptable than discussing the client's religion. Approximately 25% of private university respondents and 18% of public university respondents expressed disagreement for the counselor initiating discussions of spirituality, while 36% of private university respondents and 24% of public university respondents expressed increased disagreement for the counselor initiating discussions about the client's religion.

Regarding the appropriateness of counseling programs including training for addressing spirituality and religion with clients, respondents from both university settings expressed high levels of interest in receiving training for both topics. Yet respondents indicated higher levels of interest for addressing spirituality than religion in their training. As shown in Figure A1, 93% of private university respondents and 83% of public university respondents favored training for spirituality, compared to 87% of private university respondents and 75% of public university respondents for religious training.

Preparedness

The second area of focus for this survey explored respondents' opinions about whether they felt prepared to address spirituality and religion with clients, and whether they felt additional training was needed to address these topics with clients. As shown in Figure B1, the private university respondents expressed a higher level of preparedness than the public university respondents, and both sets of respondents felt less prepared to address religion than spirituality. From the private university setting 68% felt prepared to address spirituality and 61% felt prepared to address religion, compared with 51% of public university respondents who felt unprepared to address spirituality and 62% who felt unprepared to address religion.

Figure B1 also indicates that respondents from both university settings expressed high levels of need for additional counselor training to address spirituality and religion with clients. Although the majority of private university respondents indicated high levels of preparedness for addressing these topics with clients, an even larger majority of these respondents expressed the need for additional training. Yet the public university respondents surpassed the private university respondents in expressing the need for additional training. From the public university setting, 77% of respondents indicated they needed training for addressing spirituality and 74% indicated they needed training for addressing religion with clients.

When survey participants were asked about the number of credit hours of specific training they received for addressing spirituality or religion in counseling, the majority of respondents from both university settings indicated they had received no training from specific courses on these topics. Approximately 50% of the private university respondents and 20% of public university respondents indicated they had received training from one or more specific courses on these topics. Yet 80% of private university respondents and 40% of public university respondents indicated they had received some training on spirituality and religion within the course content of various counseling training program courses.

Survey participants were also asked to indicate the other sources of training received for addressing spirituality and religion with clients. As Figure B2 shows, respondents from both university settings indicated personal readings, supervision, conferences, and workshops (or seminars) as other sources of training they received. Write-in comments were accepted for this question and respondents from both university settings indicated undergraduate courses, other degree programs (including seminary), and church-related programs as additional sources of training they received for addressing spirituality and religion.

The preparedness section of the survey also explored the specific fields of counseling training that respondents are receiving. As Figure B3 shows, the majority of respondents from both university settings are receiving clinical (or community) counseling training. A significant number of respondents from both university settings are also receiving training for marriage and family therapy. Twenty-six percent of private university respondents and 14% of public university respondents were receiving training for both clinical (or community) counseling and marriage and family therapy. An additional 6% of respondents from both university settings were receiving training for both clinical and school counseling. Write-in comments were also accepted for this question and respondents indicated play/child therapy, crisis intervention, substance abuse therapy, art therapy, and group therapy as additional fields of counselor training received.

Practice

The third area of focus for this survey explored respondents' practice of addressing spirituality and religion with clients during intakes and counseling sessions. Approximately 50% of the respondents from both university settings indicated they had no experience counseling clients, which implies that half of the respondents have not completed at least the first three credit hours of practicum/internship in their training programs. For the remaining respondents with experience counseling clients, Figure C1

shows that respondents from both university settings indicated a higher frequency of addressing these topics occasionally or often with clients during counseling sessions, compared to addressing these topics during intakes. In addition, addressing spirituality occurred more frequently than addressing religion during intakes or counseling sessions. Furthermore, private university respondents addressed spirituality and religion more frequently than public university respondents.

The final question of the survey allowed respondents to optionally provide write-in comments to express general attitudes and beliefs about addressing spirituality and religion in counseling. Fifty-one respondents (26%) shared final thoughts for this question, and numerous common themes emerged between the two sets of respondents. Approximately the same number of respondents from both university settings stated opinions that spirituality and religion are important aspects to address as part of a holistic approach to counseling clients. The responses also indicated counselors should not force or impose these topics with clients, but should address these topics carefully and respectfully to avoid the potential for harm or abuse to clients. In addition, several comments conveyed that clients should generally initiate discussions on these topics, but there may be appropriate times when the counselor can initiate the discussions. However, building trust with the client should occur before exploring these topics with clients. Approximately the same number of respondents from both university settings also stated the importance for counseling training programs to include training for addressing spirituality and religion with clients, and expressing the desire to receive training for addressing these topics.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to specifically survey graduate students in both secular and non-secular counseling training programs in various regions of the state of Texas regarding their attitudes and beliefs for integrating spirituality and religion in counseling. Four public universities and four private universities were invited to participate in this study. These universities were geographically dispersed across regions of north, west, central, and south Texas. This study explored graduate counseling students' responses to the appropriateness, preparedness, and practice of addressing spirituality and religion when counseling clients.

In general, respondents from both private and public university training programs conveyed similar views regarding the integration of spirituality and religion in counseling. Respondents indicated more acceptance for addressing spirituality, than religion, during intakes and during counseling. In addition, respondents indicated the client initiation of spirituality and religion as being more acceptable than counselor initiation of these topics. Although responses varied somewhat between the two university settings regarding preparedness and practice of addressing spirituality and religion, both sets of respondents expressed high levels of interest in receiving training for the integration of these topics in counseling.

Although the response rate from the private university population was fairly significant, the response rate from the public university population was very low. The low overall response rate for this study limits the generalization of results to the broader population of graduate counseling students in the state of Texas. The lack of response to

the survey may indicate lack of interest in the topic, lack of time to respond to a short survey duration, or perhaps the inability for university contacts to support the email distribution dates for the short survey duration.

Future research may use other survey approaches to increase the response rate. In addition, future research may attempt to explore possible correlations between graduate students' counseling experience and the inclination to integrate spirituality and religion when counseling clients. Future research may also explore graduate students' personal practice of spirituality or religion, and how the level of personal practice impacts students' approach to the integration of these topics in counseling.

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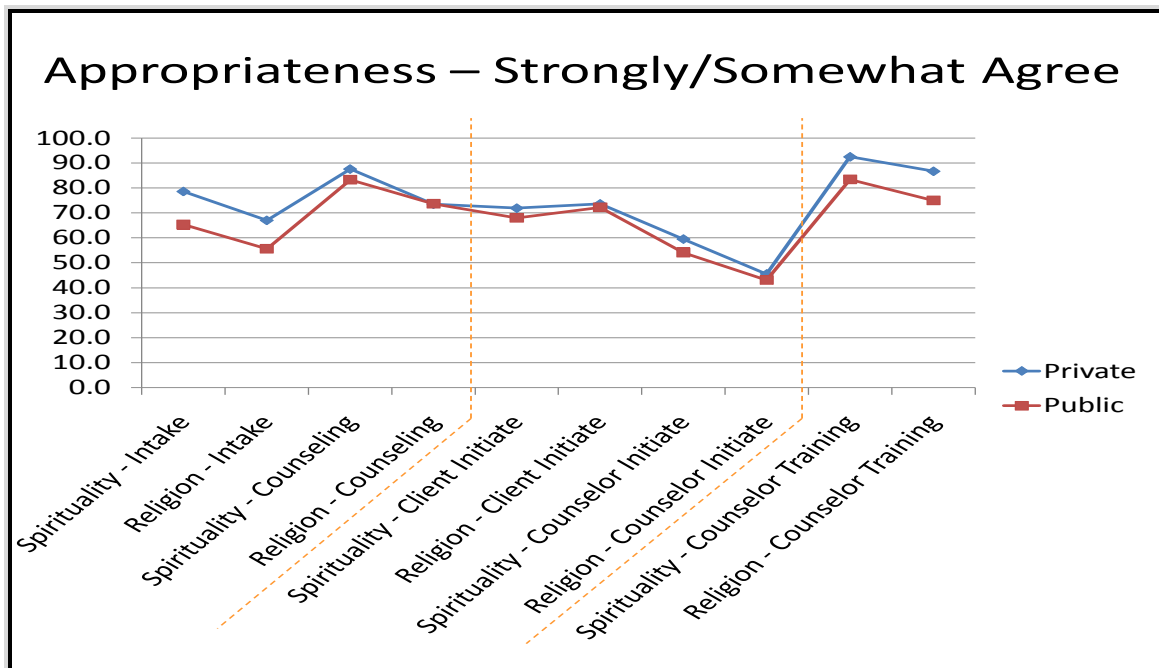
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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A

Figure A1. Comparison of *Strongly* and *Somewhat agree* responses (combined) from private and public university training program participants regarding the appropriateness of addressing spirituality or religion: (a) during intake and during counseling, (b) initiated by the client or by the counselor, and (c) during counselor training.



Appendix B

Figure B1. Comparison of *Strongly* and *Somewhat agree* responses (combined) from private and public university training program participants regarding the preparedness or the need for training for addressing spirituality and religion with clients.

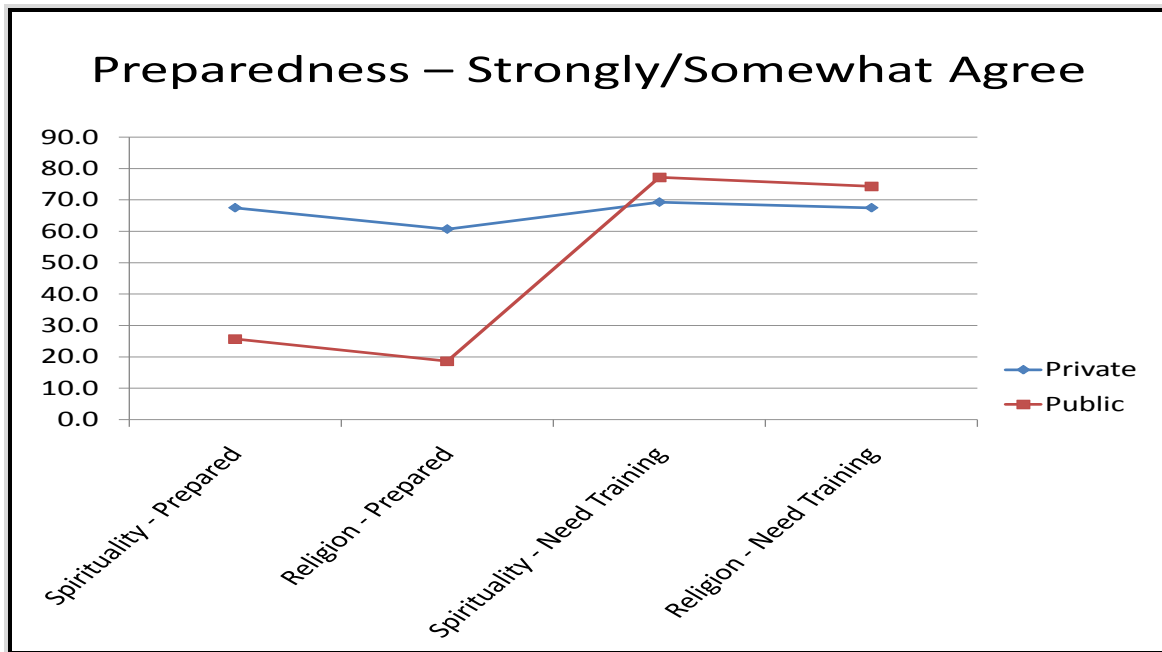


Figure B2. Comparison of responses from private and public university training program participants regarding the training received for integrating spirituality and religion into counseling sessions with clients.

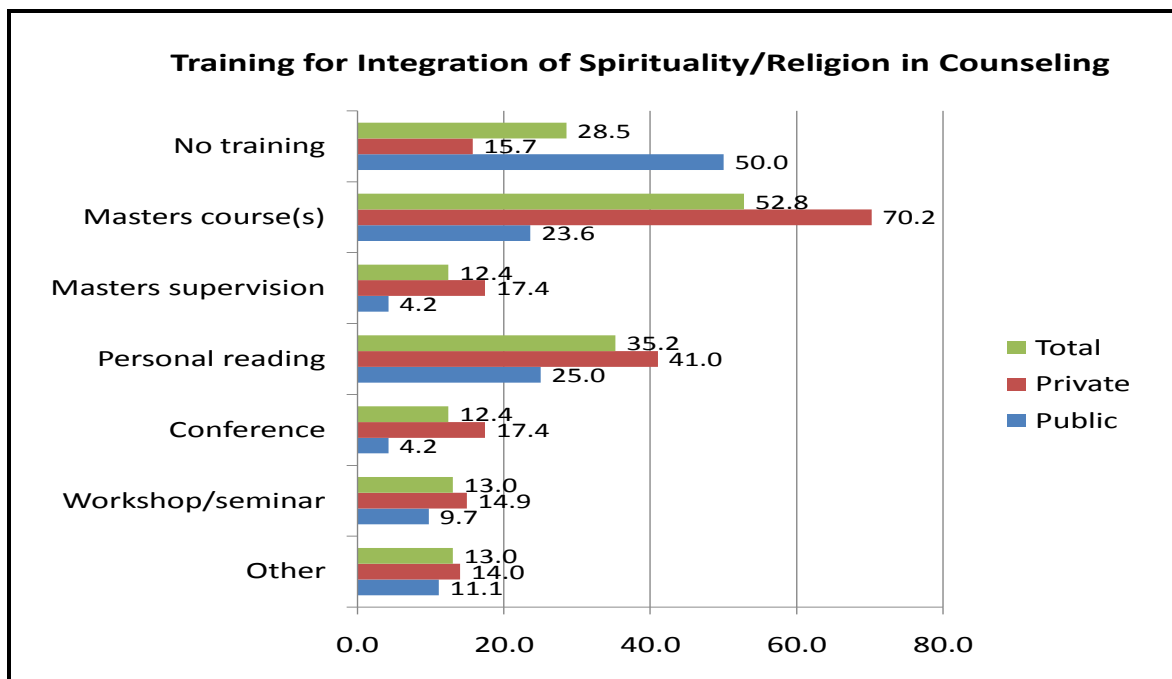
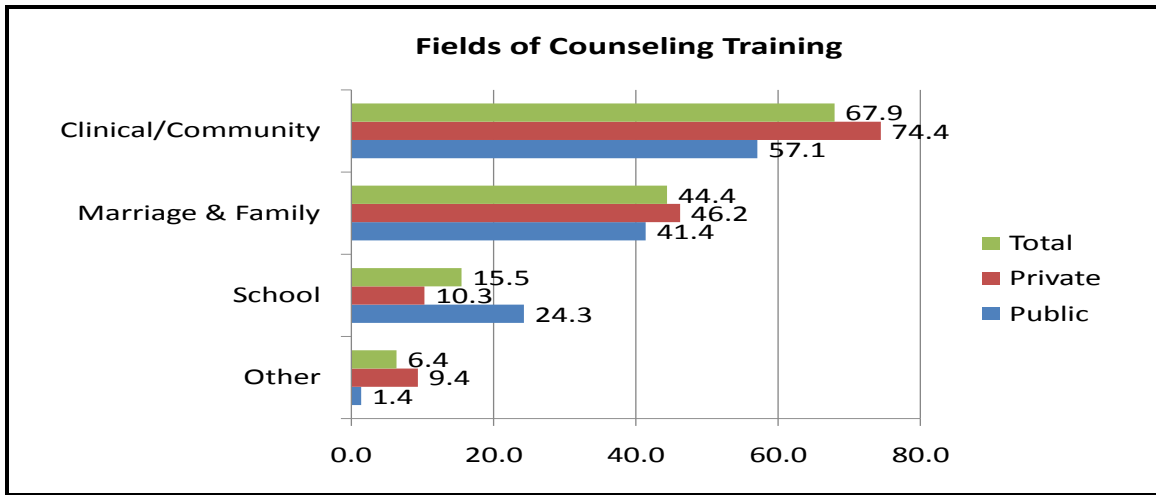


Figure B3. Comparison of responses from private and public university training program participants regarding the fields of counseling training received.



Appendix C

Figure C1. Comparison of *Occasionally* and *Often* responses (combined) from private and public university training program participants regarding the frequency of practice for addressing spirituality and religion with clients during intake and during counseling sessions.

