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Transgressing the Spiritual Boundary: Integrating the Soul into Psychology

A Symposium Present at the 113th Annual Convention of the

American Psychological Association

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Introduction

Historically, the relationship between psychology and religion has been filled with caustic, often contentious rhetoric. Each discipline attacked the other without attempting to understand the alternative perspective. At best, psychology, like many other sciences, portrayed religion as an unscientific personal belief system that evolved from metaphysics. At worst, psychology dismissed religion as a simplistic projection of fears, assuaging anxiety, and producing pathology and maladaptive thoughts and behaviors. Likewise, religion relegated science as the lesser handmaiden serving its godly mission, or worse, an artificial explanation for the creator's unknowable process, directly challenging religious belief and indirectly undermining faith development.

Inevitably, the two positions became more polarized, creating skepticism, distrust and antagonism between their respective followers. Without any framework for dialogue and to maintain their presuppositions, followers frequently isolated themselves and mentally created autonomous spheres of thought, thereby developing comfortable, separate systems. Consequently, those who investigated both spheres did so silently, without any structure or intermediary process to bridge psychology and religion.

The last few years has seen an explosion of interest in spirituality, both in popular and professional literature. Some psychologists refer to this emphasis on spirituality as the "fourth great movement." Many followers of both psychology and religion believe

the spirituality construct will mediate or bridge the divide between religion and science because of its popularity with both groups. Yet, the term, “spirituality” evolved nondescript – without clear definition or system of thought. Because “spirituality” remains undefined, some professionals and popular writers capitalize on its generic framework and force the term into their own peculiar agendas or belief systems; others simply choose to ignore it altogether.

The purpose of the present symposium is twofold: 1) to evaluate the definition of spirituality and explore the misuse of the construct in the literature, and 2) to present positive alternatives for using spirituality in psychology. The symposium intends to present the material in a developmental sequence, building on previous material. The first presenter describes the problem of an ambiguous definition of spirituality. Then, citing examples from the literature, the presenter shows how this definition, although broad, can result in an abuse of power in order to force acquiescence to desired behaviors and calls for a spirituality more explicitly and consistently defined. The other presenters explain how spirituality, thus defined, can be used effectively within the context of psychology. Specifically, the second presenter describes spirituality within the context of academics that allows openness and dialogue over religious issues. The final presenter discusses spirituality from a practitioner/supervisor’s perspective, empowering the training of licensed psychologists.

The Antics of Semantics: The Problems of an Undefined Spirituality—Fred Milacci

The term spirituality has a rich historical, etymological, and theological heritage (Schweizer, 1968; Vine, 1966; Webster, 2001), a heritage that locates the construct in the realm of the theological and metaphysical, where spiritual is equated with “the

transcendent and the immanent” (Cully, 1990, p. 608) and where the “heart set on [God] the Father’s kingdom is a heart set on the spiritual life” (Nouwen, 1981, p. 43).

Additionally, because it is grounded in the metaphysical, the term cannot be understood without reference to other metaphysical constructs such as (but not limited to) “sacred,” “transcendent,” “God,” “holy,” and so forth (Beringer, 2000). It seems logical, then, that any substantive discussion of the construct needs to include even a cursory mention of these religious, theological, and etymological origins of the term.

Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case in vast blocs of academic literature. Ignoring this rich heritage of spirituality, it seems scholars have deliberately chosen to use vague, imprecise, and noncommittal terms in their definitions, describing spirituality as “nebulous” (Vogel, 2000, p. 17), “elusive” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 333) and “hard to define” (English & Gillen, 2000, p. 87), all in an apparent attempt to appear permissive, welcoming, and make spirituality palatable to wider audience.

This type of decontextualization of religion, which fails to understand notions of the sacred implicit in the term may make the concept of spirituality more widely acceptable, but it also serves to evacuate the term, leaving it with no real meaning. As Beringer (2000) remarks, “spirituality lacking precise theoretical-conceptual definition and being subject to increasing speculations regarding its nature has unfavorable implications” (pp. 157-8). More specifically, it makes it much easier for the term to be co-opted, commodified, and misused for purposes that are anything but spiritual (see Beringer, 2002; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Milacci & Howell, 2002).

A prime example of this type of misuse is found in the business and human resource development (HRD) literature. There, spirituality is misused as a tool for

economic and marketing purposes (e.g. Bolman & Deal, 2001; Conger, 1994; Covey, 1989; Cox & Liesse 1996; Peters, 1992). In that literature, the principles and terminology of spirituality are misused to divert individuals' focus inward toward self-development, wants and needs, so they will be oblivious to the fact that they are being pushed to lend their expertise to continually boost the bottom-line. In this way, words that mean one thing within the context of one's spiritual life are turned into a commodity for misuse in the marketplace (see Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Milacci & Howell, 2002).

For these reasons, we suggest moving towards more substantive definitions of spirituality: definitions grounded in etymological, historical, theological, and religious contexts; definitions that are at least in part framed explicitly and unapologetically in terms of faith.

Spirituality and Psychology in Higher Education Contexts—Michael Firmin

Student life leadership reports that interest in spiritual issues on college campuses nationally is ardent (Rogers & Dantley, 2001). Of particular interest is that religious conversation evidently is becoming more open and mainstream, rather than being isolated to personal conversations. Yet academic psychologists may find themselves somewhat gun-shy relative to classroom or therapeutic involvements with religion in higher educational milieu. This reticence among psychologists is not a new phenomenon, however. Cortes (1999) traces a long history of conflict between psychology and religion in the United States. There has always been a degree to which spirituality does not quite belong to a scientific view of human development. As academic psychology delineates itself as the scientific study of human behavior, a chasm of sorts has been created

between the objective research approach to humankind and the mystical nature of religious experience.

Despite the longstanding reserve, we make a case that the psychological profession must give renewed attention to spirituality in higher educational milieu. Following are three reasons for this necessity. First, spirituality can be a mental health asset to college students. While not all students show tangible or measurable benefits from spiritual exercises (Anderson, 2003), a recent national study suggests that students who participate in spiritual activities adjust in more healthy ways relative to mental and emotional health when compared to cohorts with no spiritual involvement (Higher Educational Research Institute, 2004). Moreover, other studies have shown spirituality to have positive effects with college students in areas such as self-efficacy in classroom performance (Holland, 2002), substance abuse (Stewart, 2001), antisocial behavior (Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998), identity development (Marigliani, 1997), traumatic distress (Lee & Waters, 2003; Schafer, 1997), and stress coping (Graham, Furr, Flowers, & Burke, 2001; Nelson, 2000). In sum, the potential positive benefits empirically demonstrated by spiritual integration for college students simply can not be overlooked by psychologists in academic settings.

Blazing New Trails: The Challenges of Training Psychologists in Spirituality—William Anderson

The American Psychological Association (APA) has historically been one of the most progressive and ideological systems for training in the United States, constantly transgressing social and cultural norms. From its genesis in July 1892, APA sought to

progressively pursue women's rights, encouraging leadership roles and electing a woman APA president during its formative years. Women have been encouraged to enter psychology programs and attain doctorates in psychology. More recently, APA has emphasized cultural awareness and diversity awareness training as psychology has confronted the uniqueness of individuals within a diverse society. APA also included cultural and diversity issues into its ethics code, mandating that training programs develop systematic approaches and opportunities for psychologists to confront their own biases as well as develop a multicultural "awareness". This emphasis has frequently come at a "great cost" as society frequently attacks APA for being too liberal and too progressive. In spite of these challenges APA has required training programs to effectively respond to diversity. However, spirituality and religious awareness training in APA has frequently been ignored or marginalized, with many in psychology continuing to declare that "all religions and spirituality are unhealthy".

Although client surveys consistently expose religion and spirituality as significant issues for clients in therapy, many psychologists report ignoring religion and spirituality because they lack the knowledge necessary to address it, or more frequently ignoring it for fear of imposing their own values upon the client (Weinstein, Parker, and Archer, 2002; Kahle, 1997). Balancing the progressive approach of APA's training with ways of effectively dealing with the religious and spiritual needs of clients seems necessary. It is particularly important since Principle E in the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2002) places the same emphasis on the awareness of religious and spiritual needs of the client, and since society and psychology are emphasizing holistic health.

This section of the symposium addresses the difficulties in addressing spirituality and religious issues in training programs. Emphasis is placed on: 1) expanding the scope of training programs to effectively help psychologists address religion and spirituality in therapy without the fear of imposing the therapist's personal values on the client; 2) placing a greater emphasis in training on the healthy aspects of spirituality and religion in clients and in society at large; and, 3) implementing sensitivity training both educationally and experientially to broaden the psychologists understanding and awareness of spirituality and religion. Opportunities for training psychologists will also be reviewed, including: 1) broad training in differing religious and spiritual systems; 2) common religious practices used within those traditions; and 3) applying those practices effectively within the therapeutic context. Although adding to an increasingly complex training program, psychology must embrace and train psychologists for the spiritual and religious issues they will confront. Without these pieces embedded within training programs psychology will lose the respect of its clients and of the culture at large.