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Integration of Spirituality and Religion in Counselor Training Programs

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Abstract

Despite an increase in the discussion of spiritual and religious issues in psychological literature over the past 40 years, little research exists into how counselor training programs systematically train students in the integration of clients' spiritual and religious concerns. Although educators and supervisors seem to rank the integration of spirituality into counselor education as important, few training programs have adopted specific guidelines and strategies for accomplishing this task. This paper reviews selected literature examining the integration of spirituality and religion in counselor training programs. After a review of the methodology and findings of the selected research studies, this paper presents a discussion of implications for counseling training programs, along with directions for future research.

Integration of Spirituality in Counselor Training Programs

Introduction.

There has been a steady increase in the discussion of spiritual and religious issues in psychological literature since the 1960's (Bartoli, 2007), suggesting a growing awareness of the importance of these issues (Hage, 2006). Despite the increased interest, little research exists into how this awareness finds expression in counselor training programs (Schulte, Skinner, & Claiborn, 2002). Considering evidence of a correlation between spirituality and improved mental health (Brawer, Handal, Fabricatore, Roberts, & Wajda-Johnston, 2002), one might imagine how the gap in research could expose clients to harm by depriving them of therapeutic progress. Therapists lacking training, experience, and competency in assisting clients with spiritual and religious concerns relevant to the therapy session may deprive their clients of a potentially successful alternative treatment (Hage). Modifications to codes of ethics and standards for accreditation promote the inclusion of spiritual and religious issues in counselor training; however, a trend in psychological literature is to address spirituality within the umbrella of cultural diversity (Cashwell & Young, 2004; Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton DeFanti, 2006).

This paper provides a review of selected literature exploring the integration of spirituality in counselor training. The review begins by defining spirituality and religion as used in the research reviewed. Next, an overview of the studies and a discussion of the studies are provided. Findings regarding integration of spirituality into course offerings, competency of counseling educators and supervisors, and effectiveness of competency standards in promoting integration of spirituality follow. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for counseling training programs and directions for future research.

Defining spirituality.

Spirituality and *religion* are related terms (Young, Cashwell et al., 2002) that have often been used interchangeably in psychological literature (Hage, 2006); however, both vary according to the cultural experiences of individuals, whether therapists or clients (Bartoli, 2007). Spirituality seems to serve as a broader term, encompassing an individual's life purpose, one's search for a sense of wholeness, and a transcendent connectedness with a being (Hage) or the universe (Young, Cashwell et al.). Spirituality encompasses religion, a term that tends to refer to specific, organized practices and beliefs, but religion is also one way individuals can implement their spirituality (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al., 2007). Some researchers (Brawer et al., 2002; Schulte et al., 2002) used spirituality and religion together in order to solicit participants' conceptualizations of spirituality and religion, thus leaving the terms open and undefined.

Overview of studies.

Five of the studies reviewed investigated some aspect of the integration of spirituality and religion in counselor training programs (Brawer et al., 2002; Cashwell & Young, 2004; Schulte et al., 2002; Young, Cashwell et al., 2002; Young, Wiggins-Frame et al., 2007). The final study (Hage, 2006) provided a review of research "demonstrating minimal integration of spiritual and religious issues in psychology training, supervision, and course work" (p. 303). Taken as a whole, the studies seem to divide naturally into two categories based on participant demographics. One category explored the integration of spirituality by therapists who were members of the American Psychological Association (APA) (e.g., Brawer et al.; Hage; Shulte et al.). The other explored the integration of spirituality by therapists affiliated with the American Counseling Association (ACA) (e.g., Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.) or programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (e.g., Cashwell & Young; Young, Cashwell et al.).

Discussion.

Along with a review of literature exploring the integration of spirituality in psychology training programs (Hage, 2006), the first category includes two studies (Schulte et al., 2002; Brawer et al., 2002) that surveyed selected members of the APA. The 40 participants in the study by Schulte et al. were selected from member programs of the Council of Counseling Psychology Training Programs. These participants included 36 of the program directors from 72 counseling psychology programs accredited by the APA as of 1998. The 98 participants in the other study (Brawer et al.) included clinical training directors of APA-accredited programs in the United States and Canada, also from a 1998 listing. Generalization of the findings of both studies to the population of program directors is not feasible because both studies failed to use stratified random sampling, resulting in underrepresentation of non-APA accredited programs. The response rates of the surveys mailed were 58% and 51% respectively.

The survey instrument used by Schulte et al. (2002) used 22 items using a four-point, Likert-scale statements. It also included a set of open response items at the beginning to solicit program-specific attributes such as APA accreditation status, number of specific course offerings having a spiritual/religious focus, and the percentage of faculty and students perceived to be “openly religious or spiritual” (Schulte et al., p. 123). The survey used by Brawer et al. included 10 items, but no information was provided concerning the format of the items. Although survey items varied between studies, both instruments sought answers from program directors as to how they viewed their programs currently addressed spirituality through course offerings, supervision, and research.

Both studies admitted conflicting results regarding the state of the profession and variation among programs, and Brawer et al. (2002) provided almost no support for analysis of their data. Even though Schulte et al. (2002) appears to provide stronger data collection and

analysis designed to provide consistency with two previous studies (Kelly, 1994; Pate & High, 1995 as cited in Schulte et al.), it has limited applicability in areas other than counseling psychology, such as clinical psychology, marriage and family therapy, and rehabilitation psychology. The review of selected literature by Hage (2006) suggests that all these sub-disciplines of psychology demonstrate a gap between the level of perceived importance of spirituality by counselors and the level of attention given to spirituality in the respective training programs.

Other evidence cited by Hage (2006) suggests faculty and program directors in many “specialty areas have minimal training in spiritual and religious diversity and interventions” (p. 304), and that this may be a major contributing factor to the apparent lack of specific course offerings in spirituality. Eighty-six percent of training programs offered no specific course in spirituality (Schulte et al., 2002), with a majority of directors indicating that spirituality would most likely be addressed in their programs as part of cultural diversity or other courses (Brawer et al., 2002). Results seem to indicate variation in the way programs include spirituality and religion in course offerings and practicum experiences (Schulte et al.). Apparently, the majority of programs do not require students to study spiritual development, but these programs also do not discourage students from such studies. The biggest gap in curricular offerings seems to be the lack of exposure to “religious or spiritual aspects of psychological development and disorder” (Schulte et al., p. 130). Gaps in coursework offerings are also noted in the other studies reviewed.

The other category of studies reviewed explored the ways counselor training programs are currently integrating spirituality into their coursework. One goal of this research was to find out what educators thought about the importance of existing counselor competency standards in training counselors (Young, Cashwell et al., 2002; Young, Wiggins-Frame et al., 2007). Of the

136 CACREP-accredited programs in 1999, 94 CACREP liaisons surveyed responded to a five-part questionnaire (Young, Cashwell et al.). The survey instrument sought details from participants concerning their schools' counselor education programs and their perceptions of the importance of the nine competencies derived from the *Summit on Spirituality* (Young, Cashwell et al.; Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.). These meetings were sanctioned by the ACA (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.) with the intent of providing direction for counseling educators in carrying out the task of integrating spirituality into training programs (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.). Another part of the survey asked respondents to rank their capability, and the capabilities of their colleagues, in integrating the nine competencies into their educational and supervisory work. Only 46% of those surveyed ranked themselves as "prepared or very prepared" (Young, Cashwell et al., p. 28) in integrating spirituality into their teaching and supervision. Respondents ranked themselves as "more prepared" than their colleagues, but the self-report nature of the survey instrument limits the interpretation of these findings (Young, Cashwell et al.) because nothing is known about the actual skill level of any of the respondents in integrating spirituality in coursework or supervision experiences. Future research should examine course syllabi to determine how counselor educators are carrying out the integration of spirituality in their programs (Young, Cashwell et al.).

Responding to this call for research, Cashwell and Young (2004) analyzed 14 syllabi from introductory spirituality courses sampled from participants in the study by Young, Cashwell et al. (2002). They sought data on how well course objectives, content, and assignments aligned with the nine competencies created by the *Summit on Spirituality* (Cashwell & Young). Using a two-part questionnaire, this preliminary study indicated that the nine competencies would be more effective as a framework for spirituality courses than current CACREP standards (Cashwell & Young).

Members of the APA, (Hage, 2006), the ACA (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al., 2007), and participants in CACREP-accredited programs (Young, Cashwell et al., 2002) have general guidelines for addressing clients' spiritual and religious issues under the umbrella of multicultural competency. As previously mentioned, the ACA has also compiled a list of nine counselor competencies concerning spiritual and religious issues in counseling as a result of several meetings referred to as the *Summit on Spirituality* (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.). Competency in addressing clients' spirituality and religious issues is often considered important enough to be included in counselor education programs (Young, Cashwell et al.); however, it is probable that few counselor educators have had "training in spirituality and religion in counseling" in their graduate programs (Young, Cashwell et al., p. 30).

Implications for counselor training programs.

Counselor training programs could promote competency in spiritual and religious interventions by including various opportunities for trainees to engage in experiences that promote spiritual self-awareness, such as exploration of the spiritual and religious culture of their own families of origin (Brawer et al., 2002; Hage, 2006). Specific course offerings in spirituality and religion could be added to programs (Brawer et al.); however, few programs have room left in course schedules due to the demands of core competencies by licensing boards (Hage). Perhaps the current trend of increasing awareness of spirituality as an element within an existing cultural diversity class (Cashwell & Young, 2004) would prove feasible. This may be difficult because of evidence suggesting that spiritual and religious issues do not receive the same level of attention as other cultural variables receive (Schulte et al., 2002). Research comparing the effectiveness of specific coursework in spirituality to the inclusion of spirituality in existing cultural diversity training might prove helpful in determining future actions for counselor training programs.

Directions for future research.

The studies reviewed in this paper provided suggested directions for future research. Because of the lack of research into exactly what therapist training programs are teaching trainees, future research is suggested in this area (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al., 2007). Such research might take the form of a systematic review of course syllabi (Young, Cashwell et al., 2002). There also seems to be a need for continued development and refinement of specific guidelines for the integration of spirituality into counselor training programs (Young, Cashwell et al.; Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.). Based on the newness of research in the topic, therapists and researchers might benefit from increased discussion in the professional literature of how those in the field are addressing spirituality and religious issues with clients (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.). Additional research is also suggested to explore how counselors can better work with clergy as part of a holistic healing effort (Hage, 2006). Clearly, a codification of research from a broader perspective would help counselors understand the role spirituality takes on in development, treatment, and prevention of mental illness (Young, Wiggins-Frame et al.).

Summary and conclusions.

Therapists, educators, and supervisors are beginning to acknowledge the importance of including spirituality and religious training in counselor preparation programs, and based on the literature reviewed, few programs seem to have specific guidelines in place to accomplish this task. The studies reviewed seem to be a starting point for exploring just how important the integration of spirituality into counselor training programs is to educators and supervisors. As discussed in this review, standard setting bodies such as the ACA, APA, and CACREP have included spirituality as part of cultural diversity competency standards for counselors; however, little research exists that provides evidence of the effectiveness of this approach.

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