Chapter 13
Spirituality: Perspectives from Psychology

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Abstract The engagement of modern psychology with spirituality has spanned more than a century, following seminal inquiries by William James, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Today, there is no single understanding of spirituality within psychology. Nevertheless, psychological and psychologically-informed studies of spirituality have consistently revealed important aspects of this area of human functioning including the identification of a range of approaches and orientations to spirituality; the importance of various beliefs, attitudes and cognitive styles associated with spirituality; the relationship and contributions of personality and emotion to spirituality; and the relevance of spiritual attachments to human development and well-being. In the practice of psychotherapy, spirituality's inclusion has some empirical support, although professional development in spiritually-informed practice is relatively sparse. The challenge for future research is to consider whether psychological approaches may illuminate additional aspects of spirituality – especially those (such as the numinous and mysterious) that are not easily constrained within a psychological paradigm. For this illumination to occur, psychologists must be open to apparently anomalous and inexplicable components of spirituality, while maintaining a psychological perspective that facilitates sound theoretical and empirical examinations of new arenas of spirituality.

Introduction

Following seminal inquiries by William James, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the engagement of modern psychology with spirituality has spanned more than a century. Today, there is no single understanding of spirituality within psychology. Nevertheless, psychological and psychologically-informed studies of spirituality have consistently revealed important aspects of spirituality as both a psychological

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trait and a psychological state. These aspects have included the importance of various beliefs, attitudes and cognitive styles associated with spirituality; the relationship and contributions of personality and emotion to spirituality; and the relevance of spiritual attachments to human development and well-being. In the practice of psychotherapy, the inclusion of spirituality has some empirical support, although professional development in spiritually-informed practice is relatively sparse. The challenge for future research is to consider whether psychological approaches may illuminate additional aspects of spirituality – especially those (such as the numinous and mysterious) that are not easily constrained within a psychological paradigm. For this illumination to occur, psychologists must be open to apparently anomalous and inexplicable components of spirituality, while maintaining a psychological perspective that facilitates sound theoretical and empirical examinations of new arenas of spirituality. The involvement of psychology in the study of spirituality has a long, and sometimes fraught, history. This chapter outlines this history, noting progress from early psychological studies through to recent neurobiological research. In doing so, the chapter discusses various definitions of, and theoretical approaches to, spirituality; reviews historical and contemporary research and debates concerning psychology and religion; examines developmental approaches to spirituality and spiritual growth; and explores a variety of practical applications of spirituality in therapeutic practice – including the application of various modes of spirituality (e.g., prayer, meditation, and mindfulness) in professional interventions for mental health.

Understandings of Spirituality Within Psychology

Psychology has engaged with both spirituality and religion since its foundation as a distinct academic discipline around the end of the nineteenth century. Early work focused on religions as systems of belief, ritual, relationships, experience, and consequential behaviours; and/or on religiousness as the individual expressions of religion (e.g., Galton 1872; Starbuck 1899). However, in seminal descriptions of varieties of religious experiences, it might be thought that William James' definition of religion is similar to contemporary definitions of spirituality: "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 1902/1961, p. 42). Yet, unlike some of his contemporaries, James distinguished between existential and spiritual judgments about religion. For James, existential judgments relate to religion's nature, origins and history, whereas spiritual judgments relate to religion's importance, meaning, and significance. In this way James in fact contrasted *religion* as feelings, acts, and experiences, with *spiritual* as the valuing of those phenomena.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung also contributed to the *psychology* of religion, and thereby to an understanding of the nature and functions of spirituality even if 'spirituality' was not used as an explicit term in their works. Freud (1901) is well-known for his assertion that religion

is a neurosis, or defence against forbidden unconscious impulses and functions to provide a sense of psychological protection by the Father (1913). Jung (1961) also related the origins of religiousness to unconscious psychological needs: pre-existing spiritual archetypes within the collective unconscious functioned to meet needs for integration of conscious and unconscious material. Despite the early work outlined above, for most of the remainder of the twentieth century religiousness and spirituality were considered as similar, if not interchangeable, constructs. As such, studies in the psychology of religion during this period typically subsumed spirituality within substantive definitions of religion pertaining to the sacred, the divine, or an ultimate power; and functional definitions that asserted that the purpose of religion is to addresses existential issues pertaining to suffering, death, and meaning (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, much more attention was paid to discriminating spirituality from religiousness, in some measure due to disenchantment with the disappointing results of positivist programs of research in the psychology of religion, and to the growing strength of the secularization hypothesis which appeared to foretell the death of religious influence (Beit-Hallahmi 1989). Initially, religiousness/religion and spirituality were distinguished as opposites: institutional, objective religion versus personal, subjective spirituality; static religion versus dynamic spirituality; belief-based religiousness versus experience-based spirituality; negative religion versus positive spirituality (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). Later, the possibility that the constructs were nested was considered: was spirituality one dimension of the broader construct, religiousness; or was religiousness a particular social form or dimension of the broader phenomenon, spirituality? As spirituality became the more popular term in public and psychological discourse, its position as the broader construct inclusive of religiosity strengthened. However, if spirituality was conceived as religiosity plus 'something more' questions about common features or dimensions, and the nature of the 'something more' remained. One attempt to specify the 'something more' held that the focus of religiousness was the divine (God or gods) whereas spirituality could have a focus on the divine, personal transcendence, or nature (Spilka 1993). In other words, sacred qualities could be attributed to those other than God, including other persons, the self, or nature.

Although debates within the psychology of religion are ongoing, there is currently some consensus that spirituality can be defined as "a personal or group search for the sacred" where the sacred is understood to refer to "concepts of God, higher powers, transcendent beings, or other aspects of life that have been sanctified" (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005, pp. 34–35). This definition implies a broad understanding of the sacred, and introduces the notion of spirituality as a search. Nevertheless, defining spirituality in this way may limit the conceptual scope of spirituality arbitrarily and unnecessarily by ignoring identifiable functions, modes and levels of spirituality.

Specifically, three main functions of spirituality can be identified. First, spirituality conduces to an integrated system of global meaning (Park 2005) that can be particularly important in contexts of suffering, and in experiences of beauty and other instances of ineffability. Similarly, the pursuit of inner transformation is

an integral function of spirituality (Cottingham 2005); i.e., spirituality addresses a yearning for wholeness, completion, and perfection of the self despite their apparent unattainability. Finally, spiritually is often viewed in terms of connectedness within and between people, and with the sacred (Spilka 1993). Three modes of spirituality, each related to core functions of spirituality listed above, can also be identified (Miner and Dowson 2012). The modes of spirituality refer to the ways in which the functions (or dimensions) of spirituality manifest themselves and include: spirituality as an experience (*sensing* meaning, transformation, and connectedness), spirituality as a trait (*seeking* meaning, transformation, connectedness), and spirituality as a state (*attaining* meaning, transformation, connectedness). Different levels of spirituality (levels of the person, society, environment, or divinity) can also be specified depending on the object or substance or transcendent focus of an experience, trait or state (after Spilka 1993). In light of these considerations, a more comprehensive definition of spirituality that can be applied across levels of spirituality has been proposed (Miner and Dowson 2012, p. 18): *In the context of spiritual experience*, *spirituality is the search*, *beyond psychology and physicality*, *for meaning*, *transformation*, *and connectedness* (*trait*), *success in which leads to new patterns of understanding*, *becoming*, *and relating* (*state*).

This more comprehensive definition addresses the concerns of Helminiak (2008) and others that equating spirituality only with divinity renders the causes and evaluation of spirituality opaque to psychological investigation. On the other hand, this definition allows reference to God or divinity as a substantive focus of spirituality for *some* people, thus allowing for psychological investigation of the functions and modes of spirituality amongst theists, adherents of non-theistic religions, and the non-religious.

Spirituality Informs Psychological Understandings of Humanity

Consistent with the analyses above, there is growing awareness within psychology that functions and modes of spirituality have wider psychological significance for individuals and hence, spirituality can be viewed as a core dimension of the psychological self (Piedmont and Wilkins 2013). This psychological view of spirituality enables studies of spirituality to use psychological methods and for the discipline itself to gain through the study of spirituality an expanded understanding of the human person. In particular, the sub-disciplines of personality, cognition and human development have been informed by studies of spirituality.

From the time Gordon Allport (1950) argued that spirituality or religiousness formed a core psychological trait that guided and directed the whole personality, researchers in the field of personality have investigated spirituality using empirical methods (see meta-analyses by Saroglou 2002, 2010). However, earlier studies of religiosity or spirituality and personality traits did not confirm whether or not spirituality could be considered (as Allport suggested) a dimension of personality.

As a means of directly investigating this topic, Piedmont (1999) developed a measure of Spiritual Transcendence that was largely independent of the well-recognized personality traits specified by the Five Factor Model of personality (McCrae and Costa 1997). Piedmont's definition of spirituality focused on the human need for transcendence, and "spiritual transcendence" was defined as "the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place to view life from a larger, more objective viewpoint" (Piedmont 1999, p. 988). Subsequent work showed that, while spirituality is a dimension of personality, it is distinguishable from the traditional five factors of personality and represents a distinct motivation to find personal meaning in the search for the sacred (Piedmont and Wilkins 2013). Moreover, spirituality-as-motivation predicts psychological outcomes after other personality traits have been taken into account (Piedmont and Wilkins 2013). In this way, work on spirituality and personality has established that spirituality is a distinct and efficacious personality trait, and so should be considered as more complete understandings of human personality are being developed.

Spirituality has also been studied within the sub-discipline of cognition. Cognitive psychology holds that spiritual beliefs are particular cognitions that can be investigated in the same way as non-spiritual cognitions (Barrett and Zahl 2013). Since most of the psychological studies of spiritual cognitions have been conducted using samples of believers from theistic religions, the types of spiritual cognitions receiving most attention include concepts of God, causal explanations (attributions) relating to God, belief in orthodox religious statements, attention and memory in the context of spiritual experiences, and spiritually or religiously based attitudes. For example, belief in a just and benevolent God rather than fate leads to more positive attributions (Pargament 1997); attributions to God rather than to people or luck are associated with more positive reappraisals (Miner and McKnight 1999); and more positive spiritual attributions and reappraisals foster positive spiritual coping (Pargament 1997). Further, positive spiritual coping (such as seeking spiritual support, doing good deeds, etc.) is linked to reduced psychological symptoms and greater well-being (see a recent review by Barrett and Zahl 2013).

The third sub-discipline that has been informed by studies in spirituality is developmental psychology. Viewing spirituality as a trait that involves meaning-seeking, transformation, and connectedness across the lifespan has led to more complete accounts of human development, and studies of spiritual transformation and connectedness have been informed by developmental theories such as attachment theory (Bowlby 1969; see the next section). Early research (e.g., Elkind 1963) on the development of children's understanding of God investigated parallels with the development of abstract thinking structures. However, an appreciation of spirituality as a search for meaning also led researchers to investigate the inherent capacities of children to form content-meanings, and the ways in which people form meaning systems across the lifespan (Park et al. 2013). Research into pre-schoolers' understandings of God suggests that although young children may draw pictures of God in human form and recognize God as causal agent (Petrovich 1997), they typically think about God in terms of God's unique, non-anthropomorphic powers (Barrett and Richert 2003). These and similar studies (see a review by

Boyatzis 2005) suggest that children are prepared to draw conclusions about God as transcendent, and then acquire the content of their understandings through religious socialization. Further, children have spiritual experiences (Hay and Nye 1998) and seek to incorporate such experiences into their developing meaning system (Coles 1990). Thus, studies of spirituality and active meaning-making challenge the earlier dominance of socialization theories and establish that people are not passive recipients of meaning (Park et al. 2013).

Psychology Informs Understandings of Spirituality

Studies of spiritual experiences have been conducted by means of phenomenological, correlational, and experimental methods. Phenomenological studies provide rich descriptions of experiences of spirituality at the individual level. For example, William James' (1902) analysis of selected cases pointed to the transformative effects of spirituality and Rudolph Otto's (1958) examination of mystical experiences suggested a pre-conscious sensing of the 'Other' in spiritual experiences related to a personal transcendent object.

Questionnaire studies of spiritual experiences produce descriptions of common elements of these experiences across research participants, and investigate associations between elements of spiritual experiences and other psychological characteristics. In this tradition, Ralph Hood (1995; Hood et al. 2001) developed a measure of mysticism and confirmed three dimensions of mystical experience relating to an undifferentiated sense of cosmic unity; a sense of unity within multiplicity; and interpretative aspects relating to the assigned meaning of the experience (as religious, numinous, etc.), respectively. The reporting of mystical experiences is associated with reports of paranormal and anomalous phenomena (including experiences of UFOs, alien abductions, and near death or past life experiences), with irregular church attendance, and with membership of non-traditional religions (Hood 2005). These studies suggest that the propensity for spiritual experiences may be universal, but the form or meaning of spiritual experiences may be determined by identifiable psycho-social factors.

Experimental studies clarify the precise correlates of spiritual experiences, such as neurological or psychological states. Neuropsychological studies address spirituality as at least partly innate, or hard-wired, with evidence being extant for an array of neurological systems that prepare the individual for spirituality (e.g., McNamara 2009). Conversely, experimental manipulations in extreme situations such as isolation tanks, or using pseudo-psychedelic drugs in a religious setting, demonstrate that both settings and psychological states induced by preparatory mental sets are important correlates of reported spiritual experiences (Hood 1995).

Studies of spirituality as a trait (i.e., as the disposition towards a search for meaning, transformation and connectedness) and as a relatively attained state help clarify individual differences in the development and psychological expression of spirituality. As indicated previously, spiritual experiences are common among

children (Hay and Nye 1998). Yet the understanding of spiritual experiences is shaped by close human relationships. Thus, just as nurturing infant-caregiver relationships are necessary for the development of brain structures and cognitive-emotional templates for all subsequent relationships (Schore 1994), so too, the development of the infant brain in interaction with a sensitive caregiver provides the representational templates necessary for secure attachment to God (Miner 2009b). If early human attachment experiences are markedly deficient, then later theistic spiritual experiences will be less able to provide adequate meaning, transformation and connectedness (Miner 2009a), even when the child or adolescent is presented with effective religious teaching (Granqvist 2010). Moreover, infant-caregiver relationships are important for subsequent spirituality not simply because close relationships facilitate the acceptance of religious teaching in the family home. To the contrary, secure attachment to God predicts positive experiences of God beyond the effects of attachment to parents and doctrinally based concepts of God (Zahl and Gibson 2012). Further, children with secure attachment to caregivers are more likely to perceive God in positive ways, irrespective of whether the child is brought up within a religious home (Granqvist et al. 2007). For these reasons it is reasonable to conclude that secure attachment experiences in relation to God provide a basis for the development of a positive cognitive-affective framework facilitating spiritual seeking and at least partial attainment of spiritual states of meaning, transformation and connectedness. As such, psychological studies from an attachment framework demonstrate not only that religious education, but also emotional preparation for theistic spiritual understanding as provided by attachment with human parents, is essential in the development of spiritual traits and states.

Finally, psychological studies of adolescents and adults clarify how life contexts and psychological resources (such as human attachment styles, cognitive processes, personality, etc.) motivate trait-spirituality. The transcendent object of the search (e.g., God, gods, nature,) cannot be investigated psychologically. Yet psychological research clarifies the process of spiritual seeking, particularly when situations of threat, loss, or challenge motivate the spiritual search. In these situations, as causes and outcomes are questioned, meaning becomes salient (Spilka et al. 1985); self-transformation is typically sought (e.g., through psychotherapy or religious conversion); corresponding changes in meaning-systems occur (Paloutzian 2005); and relationships with others, including spiritual relationships, are intensified (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013).

Applications of Spirituality in Psychological Practice

As both a trait and relatively attained state, spirituality is recognized as having implications for psychological health. For this reason, the profession accepts that spiritual issues may form a focus of therapy, as well as contributing to the treatment of psychological issues. For example, from edition IV onwards, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association has included loss of

faith, and questioning spiritual values as foci of therapy (see Turner et al. 1995). Further, despite some caution due to restricted clinical evidence, psychological practice informed by various theoretical orientations is currently being developed. This practice includes interventions based on the functions of meaning, transformation and connectedness in both non-religious and religious forms of spirituality.

Meaning is emphasized within existential therapies such as logotherapy, developed by Victor Frankl (1997). Frankl argued that there is an innate longing for meaning that can motivate perseverance through suffering and result in eventual healing. In therapy, the focus is on the spiritual, understood in terms of the human will as it seeks meaning, and not in terms of religion per se.

Transformation of the self is recognized as a goal of therapies broadly associated with positive psychology, and spiritually-based interventions in this tradition are used to enhance acceptance and other qualities previously understood primarily in religious terms. Acceptance is based on non-judgmental awareness of oneself, attained through the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness has a long history within Buddhist practice and associated therapies include purposeful attention in the present (Kabat-Zinn et al. 1992) and observation of bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings (Bishop 2002; Shapiro et al. 1998). Through mindfulness clients learn to tolerate distress and regulate maladaptive emotions, thus promoting inner transformation and capacities for better relationships with others (Hayes et al. 1999).

Connectedness is emphasized in therapies that seek to deepen relationships with other people, and/or the divine, or develop a person's sense of unity with the cosmos. Therapies based on attachment theory such as schema therapy (Young et al. 2003) help clients modify insecure styles of attaching to others and promote adaptive modes of coping and relating (Giesen-Bloo et al. 2006). A spiritually modified form of schema therapy, incorporating thoughts and imagery relating to the client's attachment to God, has been developed for use with theists (Miner 2009c).

Availability of Professional Development in Spirituality for Psychologists

The study of spirituality is not compulsory for psychologists, although the psychology of religion and spirituality is recognized as a sub-discipline within psychology (as evidenced by Division 36, *Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, of the American Psychological Association- APA). As a non-sectarian grouping, Division 36 offers professional development through its journal, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, mid-year conference, and program at the APA annual convention. As a discrete topic and subject, the psychology of religion is increasingly taught in tertiary psychology programs world-wide.

Further, some religiously-based institutions in the USA offer APA accredited graduate programs in psychology where the explicit teaching of religious spirituality is integrated with mainstream psychology. These programs include Christian

psychology programs at Azusa Pacific University, Biola University, Fuller Theological Seminary, George Fox University, Regent University, and Wheaton College. The *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* and *Journal of Psychology & Theology* also provide for the ongoing professional development of Christian Psychologists.

There is no corresponding APA-accredited Buddhist program that could encompass the whole of one's psychological training, but Buddhist practices are taught within graduate programs in transpersonal psychology. Often Jungian theories and parapsychology are also taught within the curricula informed by transpersonal psychology. Yeshiva University in New York offers an accredited graduate psychology program in which Jewish values and spirituality are emphasized throughout the curriculum and in campus life, and the *Journal of Psychology and Judaism* offers academic material for the professional development of psychologists working in the Jewish community.

Future Directions for Spirituality Within Psychology

Any discipline tends to fit the content of its focus into the contours or parameters of its own discipline. Hence, psychology views spirituality in ways consistent with psychological understandings of phenomena. The challenge for psychology, however, is to consider whether psychological approaches to spirituality can illuminate aspects of spirituality that are not easily constrained within a psychological paradigm. For this challenge to be adopted, psychologists must be open to diverse and seemingly anomalous components of spirituality, yet without losing the integrity of a psychological perspective.

Spiritual experiences, traits and states that are not yet satisfactorily explained by psychology present theoretical and methodological challenges to researchers. The experience of God as an attachment figure, for example, can be partially explained in terms of innate preparedness for God representations (Boyatzis 2005), human attachment (Kirkpatrick 1999), neurological and cognitive development (Schore 1994), and specific religious socialization (Granqvist and Hagerkull,1999). However, the apparent capacity of (at least some) people with insecure human attachment, compromised neurological development and/or minimal religious education to develop secure attachment to God remains unexplained psychologically. Further, while the consequences of secure attachment to God for positive psychological outcomes are well-established (Zahl and Gibson 2012), it is not yet conclusively established whether secure attachment to God as a transcendent attachment figure can offer psychological benefits beyond those offered by human attachment figures. Research in this area must be informed by understanding of the content of spiritual representations, as well as by processes implicated in developing and maintaining secure attachment. In future studies, the interplay of content (clarified by theological or religious studies) and processes (clarified by psychological and neurological studies) should be considered.

Processes involved in seeking spiritual meaning, transformation and connectedness also require further research at the boundaries of other disciplines. Whereas the search for meaning clearly involves cognitive processes and representations (Park et al. 2013), it is possible that spiritual meaning-making might begin with direct relational knowledge of the spiritual object of meaning in cases where that object is personal. For this reason, other ways of meaning-making, such as those developed through direct relational knowledge of God or divine figures (Watts and Williams 1988) should be included in future work. The search for transformation as a dimension of trait-spirituality raises questions about the processes and outcomes of spiritual maturation: are these processes and outcomes the same as for psychological maturation in general, or different? Broadly, psychological maturation is understood as the unfolding of innate capacities within a facilitative environment, but the innate capacities for spirituality, the nature of a facilitative spiritual environment, and the degree to which 'unfolding' corresponds to the process of spiritual maturation require much more research. Finally, the search for connectedness with the transcendent is typically facilitated by human communities. Facilitating groups, such as those associated with a particular church, mosque, temple, or sacred site, have been studied psychologically to clarify their processes and functions (e.g., Krause and Wulff 2009). However, these groups also claim to be more than a club or social network by virtue of their reference to the sacred. If so, research is needed to establish what it is about these groups beyond the psychological that supports connectedness with the numinous or transcendent.

Spiritual states indicating relatively attained meaning, transformation and connectedness have not been studied extensively by psychologists. From time to time specific exemplars of attained spirituality have been invoked in the psychological literature (such as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela), but there is little agreement regarding the antecedents and consequences of attained spirituality, even in paradigm cases where there is apparently high attainment of all three dimensions. There is also to date little investigation of states where spirituality is *desired* but not attained. These states may be indicative of spiritual disorders and conditions that have compromised the person's grasp of meaning, their capacity for transformation, and their connectedness. Thus, more work from the perspective of psychopathology, with sensitivity to the desire for spirituality, is needed.

In order to investigate some of the boundary conditions between psychology and spirituality, research methods that can encompass both fields need to be further developed. One limitation of traditional quantitative psychological studies, for example, is their incapacity to fully encompass global experiences, traits and states. If the sacred and transcendent represents the unity and wholeness of existence, or God, then traditional quantitative methods will be inadequate for holistic investigations of spirituality. Conversely, one limitation of qualitative, phenomenological studies is that their focus and methods involve subjective human consciousness. Thus, aspects of spirituality that may be objective and/or not constituted by human consciousness cannot be studied phenomenologically. The method of William James (1902) was the first attempt to bring together objective and phenomenological approaches to spirituality. With increasing philosophical

explication of phenomenology (Heidegger 1962; Husserl 1913/1962), and the development of inter-subjective accounts of reality (e.g., Bracken 2009), it may be possible to suggest new research methods that investigate spirituality both subjectively and objectively, in the context of unified research programs.

Conclusion

Spirituality is increasingly accepted as an integral aspect of human psychology. With reference to both theoretical and empirical studies, this chapter has outlined historical and contemporary psychological understandings of spirituality; explored spirituality from personality, cognitive, and development perspectives; and addressed the contribution that awareness of spirituality can make to interventions directed towards mental health and personal wellbeing. While more work remains to be done in each of these areas, spirituality has emerged as a fundamental construct in psychology, and is now recognised as being critical when addressing the well-being and holistic development of human beings. This recognition has extended, and continues to extend, both our understanding of spirituality and our understanding of psychology as a discipline capable of addressing important spiritual issues.

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