Influences of Spirituality on Counselor Selection

By: C. Belaire and J. Scott Young

Article:

The influence of participants' spirituality on their choice of a counselor was investigated. Sixty-three university students completed the Human Spirituality Scale, which is a global measure of spirituality. Participants also completed the Counselor Description Questionnaire, which asked them to select 1 of 2 counselors with whom they would prefer to work on the basis of descriptions of the counselors' clinical approaches (1 including spirituality as an area of expertise). Quantitative analyses indicated that level of spirituality had no statistically significant effect on counselor preference; however, qualitative results suggested that a counselor described as competent in working with spiritual issues did influence some participants' preference for that counselor.
The potential for spirituality is inherent in all human beings and is considered by many writers as essential to the counseling process (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Hinterkopf, 1994). Subsequently, the amount of attention the concept of spirituality has received in the field is increasing rapidly.

In recent years, the literature has suggested that spirituality, religion, and values were important issues to be discussed in the counseling session and that counselors have become more aware of the relevance of exploring these issues with clients (Grimm, 1994; Ingersoll, 1994; Mack, 1994; Pate & Bondi, 1992; Suyemoto & Macdonald, 1996). Several writers have indicated that the inclusion of spirituality in counseling is justified because it affects clients' behaviors, thoughts, and morals (Bergin, 1988; Blakeney & Blakeney, 1992; Coughlin, 1992). A spiritual emphasis within the counseling process served to (a) offer an explanation for human nature, (b) stabilize values through a moral frame of reference, and (c) offer interventions based on spiritual methods (Bergin, 1988, 1991).

The need for counselors to address spirituality in counseling has been further demonstrated by the high levels of interest in spiritual matters reported by the U.S. population in various surveys and the desire of clients to work with counselors sensitive to spiritual issues. For example, Kroll and Sheehan (1989) indicated that 90% of people believe in God. Similarly, Bergin (1991) reported that 94% of people in the U.S. believed in a universal spirit and that 85% reported that their religious beliefs were important to them. Furthermore, Kelly (1995) indicated that counselors with spiritual beliefs and values were preferred by clients with serious problems and that 81% of the people he surveyed wanted a counselor to integrate values and beliefs into therapy. According to a survey conducted by Quackenbos, Privette, and Kleintz (1985), 79% of their participants thought that religious beliefs were important to address in counseling and 35% wanted religious counseling. More important, clients' religious orientations were most noticeable when selecting a counselor, suggesting that some clients look specifically at the spiritual and religious orientation of a potential counselor (Hendlin, 1989).

Conversely, the literature indicated that therapists tended to be less religious than the general population (Bishop, 1992; Grimm, 1994; Kroll & Sheehan, 1989). Bergin and Jensen (1990) found that 77% of therapists adhering to various theoretical orientations agreed that they live by religious standards but that only 29% of the therapists believed that religious issues were important in clinical treatment. One explanation for the lack of attention clinicians place on spirituality in psychotherapy may be the lack of emphasis given to spirituality in training programs. A study by Kelly (1994) reported that as few as 25% of counselor education programs at secular or religious schools offered a course in spirituality or integrated spirituality into their courses, and public universities gave spirituality almost no attention in course work. A low emphasis on spirituality in internships

was reported as well. Pate and Bondi (1992) contended that counselor education programs seldom addressed spirituality, and, if addressed, referral of clients to clergy was the most common response to the issue of spirituality. Similarly, in a study of California psychologists, 81% of respondents claimed that religious issues were seldom mentioned during course work in psychology (Shafranske & Malony, 1985).

Developmentally, the college years present students with many opportunities to question their religious beliefs and a time of spiritual exploration and transition (Genia, 1990). According to Genia, during the college years, formal religion loses ground to spiritual experience. In a study by Simon and Gerber (1990), who surveyed a college population, the ability of a counselor to address spiritual issues was an important consideration for nearly 61% of students who mentioned spirituality as an important factor in their selection of a counselor. Furthermore, models of development that consider spiritual dimensions, such as Fowler's (1991) stages of faith, indicate that the college years are often the time when young adults question their previously held beliefs and form a uniquely personal worldview.

Given that spirituality is clearly an important value for most of the U.S. population and yet is underemphasized in counselor training (Kelly, 1994), the purpose of this study was to examine whether the reported level of spirituality among a college student sample was related to the preference to see a counselor who could address spiritual issues in counseling. The specific research question considered whether participants with higher scores on the Human Spirituality Scale would prefer a counselor who could address spiritual issues in counseling.

Participants
Sixty-three students enrolled in upper-level business management courses (34 men and 29 women, mean age = 23 years) completed a measure of spirituality and a counselor preference questionnaire. Seventy-eight percent (n = 49) of the participants were seniors, 21% (n = 13) were juniors, and 1% (n = 1) were sophomores. The highest religious affiliation reported by the participants was Baptist (35%), followed by no religious affiliation (18%). Other frequently reported religious affiliations were Christian (13%), Catholic (13%), and Methodist (11%). Of the participants, 59% (n = 37) reported never having worked with a counselor, whereas 41% (n = 26) reported having participated in counseling at least once.

Instruments
Human Spirituality Scale (HSS). The HSS is a 20-item, 5-point Likert-type instrument that measures three content dimensions of spirituality: (a) larger context or structure in which to view one's life, (b) an awareness of life itself and other living things, and (c) a reverent compassion for the welfare of others (Wheat, 1991). Wheat reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 89 for the HSS. Accordingly, a panel of expert raters determined content validity, and construct validity was demonstrated through a series of factor analyses. Each item on the HSS is assigned a numeric value of 1 through 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) corresponding to the Likert-type scale, and a respondent's total score comprises the summation of all 20 items. Counselor Description Questionnaire (CDQ). Two equivalent descriptions of a counselor were developed by the first author as prompts for participants to indicate their preference for one of the counselors. The descriptions were developed to be similar along important dimensions, including sex, level of training, geography, and number of years of counseling experience. The primary difference between the two counselor descriptions was that one description included a statement pertaining to the counselor's expertise in working with spiritual issues, whereas the other description did not refer to this skill. The counselor descriptions were adapted from Simon and Gerber's (1990) study and were judged by an expert rater for content validity. The expert rater was a professor of counselor education who has extensive research experience and is familiar with the literature pertaining to spirituality in counseling. The counselor descriptions appeared as follows:

Counselor 1: Carol is a licensed and certified counselor who has been practicing in Mississippi for 9 years. Her direct and active style focuses on thoughts and behaviors. In therapy, Carol focuses on changing patterns, setting goals, and personal growth. Carol does individual treatment of adults and children, marriage and family therapy, and leads support groups.

Counselor 2: Beth is a licensed and certified counselor who has practiced individual, marriage and family therapy, and group counseling in Mississippi for 9 years. Her practice includes treatment of both adults and children. Her style encourages clients to explore their personal beliefs, growth, and spirituality.

Participants provided an explanation of their rationale for selecting one counselor over the other by responding in writing to two open-ended questions. The questions addressed (a) the characteristics of the counselor that persuaded the participants' selection of that particular counselor and (b) factors that contributed to their exclusion of the other counselor.

Demographics. The demographic portion of the data collection asked participants to provide information regarding their age, sex, religious affiliation, school classification, academic major, and participation in counseling.

Procedure

Participants for the study were solicited from two sections of advanced business administration courses. A brief overview of the purposes of the study was provided, and individuals who agreed to participate voluntarily completed all instruments at that time (the HSS, the CDQ, and demographic information).

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Table 1 provides means and standard deviations for HSS levels of spirituality, counselor preference, sex, and religious affiliation. The mean score for the HSS was 77.85 (SD = 8.24), with higher scores representing higher levels of spirituality. To examine the level of spirituality among the present sample, we divided participants' HSS scores into three levels on the basis of their mean score and standard deviations of the sample. Scores fell into the following ranges: high (one standard deviation above the mean), moderate (between plus one and minus one standard deviation from the mean), and low (one standard deviation below the mean). Participants scoring high on the HSS constituted 13% (n = 8) of the sample, whereas moderate-scoring and low-scoring participants constituted 71% (n = 45) and 16% (n = 10) of the sample, respectively. In terms of the level of spirituality, the participants' scores were similar to the samples of Wheat (1991), who found a mean score of 75.36 for male participants and 82.83 for female participants.

When mean levels of spirituality were considered regarding preference for the two counselor descriptions, results indicated that respondents choosing both the counselor description including spirituality and the description excluding spirituality fell within the moderate range of spirituality: including spirituality, M = 78.34; excluding spirituality, M = 77.65. Mean levels of spirituality for both sexes were roughly equivalent and also fell within the moderate range of scores: for women, M = 78.87; for men, M = 76.98. A moderate level of spirituality was also found among participants of the various religious affiliations, except for Presbyterian, which fell in the high range (M = 87.00). It is interesting that participants reporting no religious affiliation scored within the moderate range of spirituality (M = 76.93).

Counselor Selection

To address the primary research question regarding whether individuals with higher levels of spirituality would demonstrate a preference for a counselor who reported skill in addressing issues of spirituality as part of counseling, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) at the .05 level to compare the participants' levels of spirituality with their choice of a counselor. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference among participants with high, moderate, or low levels of spirituality on their selection of a counselor who could address spiritual issues, $F(2,60) = 1.67$, $p > .05$. In fact, 71% (n = 45) of the respondents preferred the counselor whose description did not include spirituality, and only 29% (n = 18) of the respondents preferred the counselor description including spirituality. To examine, specifically, the participants' counselor preference, we conducted a chi-square analysis, which revealed that a statistically significant number of participants preferred the counselor without spirituality in the description: $chi^2(43) = 48.86$, $p < .05$ (n = 45 for Counselor 1, n = 18 for Counselor 2).

Qualitative Data

Given the results of the statistical analyses, the participants' qualitative responses on the CDQ regarding spirituality in counseling seem interesting in view of many participants stating that the issue of spirituality did have a direct influence on their preference for a counselor. In fact, 35% (n = 22) of the respondents stated specifically that the inclusion of spirituality in the descriptions affected their selection of a counselor. Of these, 64% (n = 14) indicated that they did not want a counselor who could address spiritual issues, whereas only 36% (n = 8) indicated that they wanted a counselor to include spirituality in counseling.

According to the written responses to the CDQ, participants held strong values concerning the issue of spirituality in counseling, regardless of the content of their beliefs. One participant's response seemed representative of respondents who did not want a counselor to address spirituality. He wrote, "I can grow on my own. I need help to handle everyday stress in my life. I will explore my spirituality, beliefs, etc. on my own time."
Similarly, another respondent stated, "I don't go to counseling for spiritual help. I go there for goal setting." Furthermore, one respondent expressed apprehension that discussing spirituality would move the conversations toward discussion of religion, which would make him uncomfortable.

In contrast, responses of participants who wanted spirituality addressed in counseling indicated a desire for this skill in the counselor. One respondent stated that she liked "her (the counselor's) encouragement to explore your personal beliefs, growth, and SPIRITUALITY." Another responded positively to the spiritually oriented counselor description, stating she liked that "her style included beliefs, growth, and spirituality."

Regarding factors other than spirituality that were important in the respondents' selection of a counselor, the statement in Counselor 1's description about focusing on "changing patterns, setting goals, and personal growth" seemed particularly important. In fact, these factors were mentioned as the preferred characteristics between the two counselors. Of the respondents, 70% (n = 44) included "personal growth," 65% (n = 41) included "goal setting," and 33% (n = 21) discussed "changing patterns" as desirable skills of Counselor 1.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this study suggest that, although in theory individuals may value a counselor who is sensitive to their spiritual concerns, in practice other factors may be more important when selecting a counselor. It is interesting that the present findings seem inconsistent with earlier surveys in which most individuals reported a preference for counselors who are sensitive to spiritual issues in counseling (Kelly, 1995; Lehman, 1993; Quackenbos et al., 1985). According to the results of the ANOVA, participants' with higher levels of spirituality were no more likely to prefer a counselor who had expertise in the area of spirituality. Furthermore, the qualitative data indicated that counselor emphases such as goal setting, changing of behavioral patterns, and personal growth were primary considerations for most respondents. Although Kelly (1995) found that 81% of people reported that they preferred a counselor who could address spirituality within the counseling process, the present study found that fewer people may actually consider these issues paramount when compared with other counseling activities. Previous research has indicated that the general population is interested in religion and spirituality as a topic for discussion in counseling (Hendlin, 1989; Quackenbos et al., 1985); however, a significant portion of the population may also be reticent to discuss these topics in counseling. Most respondents in this study did not want to discuss spiritual issues in the counseling setting.

As indicated by the qualitative data, the topic of spirituality in the counselor description influenced the choice of counselor (both positively and negatively) made by the participant. This information suggests that spirituality may be only one of many factors involved in the selection of a therapist. Therefore, because of the personal nature of spiritual issues, counselors may want to consider a client's preparedness to explore this dimension. In other words, it could be that including spirituality in descriptions of counseling services may attract some clients while discouraging others.

There are limitations that bear consideration when evaluating the findings of this study. Numerous respondents cited factors of the counselors influencing their preferences that were not related to spirituality, suggesting that although expert rating was used in the stimulus development, the differing elements may have confounded the data. In addition, the possibility of order bias regarding presenting the counselor descriptions cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, taken together, the results suggest several interesting insights into how a client's level of spirituality might play into their selection of a counselor. The quantitative analyses suggest that among many of the participants in the present sample who were spiritually oriented, factors such as a problem-solving and goal-focused counselor style seem to be considerations in their selection of a counselor. However, these findings must be considered with caution owing to the fact that this was a college-educated sample and presumably a more sophisticated group than the general population. Furthermore, the fact that a substantial portion of the sample (41%) had participated in counseling before may indicate that this sample was more therapy savvy than the general population.

Worthington and Scott (1983) indicated that highly religious individuals are less likely to seek out a secular counselor because of concerns about how their beliefs will be viewed. Furthermore, Worthington (1986) contended that highly religious clients are at a higher risk for early termination. These findings should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the present study. It is noteworthy that the percentage of individuals (29%) who reported that the counselor description including spirituality influenced their preference for this counselor is roughly equivalent to the findings of Quackenbos et al (1985), who found that 35% of individuals surveyed wanted religious counseling. These data raise questions concerning the role that a client's religious orientation rather than the counselor's skill in including spirituality may play in religious individuals' preferences for a particular counselor. Therefore, rather than considering only spiritual orientation when investigating counselor preferences, future researchers might also screen individuals for level of religious commitment. Specifically, it seems relevant to investigate the role religious commitment plays as a self-selection criterion among highly religious individuals. If level of religious commitment is found to be an important factor in the counselor selection process, perhaps criteria can be developed to assist in counselor selection among highly religious and less religious individuals.

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for HSS Level of Spirituality, Counselor Preference, Sex, and Religious Affiliation

Variable	M	SD	n
Level of spirituality			
Low	65.19	5.59	10
Moderate	78.25	4.21	45
High	91.37	3.34	8
Counselor preference			
With spirituality	78.34	9.49	18
Without spirituality	77.65	7.80	45
Sex			
Women	78.87	8.39	29

Men	76.98	8.14	34

Religious affiliation

Christian	82.37	10.72	8
Catholic	79.34	6.60	8
Protestant	68.99	--	1
Baptist	75.88	7.08	22
Methodist	79.14	14.67	7
Pentecostal	78.50	9.20	2
Church of Christ	78.00	--	1
Presbyterian	87.00	--	1
Buddhist	75.00	2.83	2
None reported	76.93	4.48	11

Note. HSS = Human Spirituality Scale. Dashes under SD indicate inability to calculate.

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