

Spirituality in Counselor Training: A Content Analysis of Syllabi From Introductory Spirituality Courses

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Abstract:

The authors discuss the results of a content analysis of 14 syllabi of introductory courses on spirituality in counseling. Course syllabi were examined to determine trends in the content of these courses and to determine if the instruction is consistent with 9 competencies developed at the Summit on Spirituality. Results suggested that there was substantial variance in the extent to which the competencies were covered in the syllabi. The authors discuss implications for teaching courses on spirituality in counseling.

For many people, spirituality and religion are vital aspects of their lives (Gallup & Bezilla, 1994; Hadaway, Marler, & Chaves, 1993). Despite the fact that many counselors and counselor educators believe religion and spirituality to be important in counselor training (Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, & Belaire, 2002), survey data have shown that limited numbers of programs include this content in the curricula, although the numbers appear to be rising. Kelly (1994) found that only 25% of counseling programs included religion and spirituality in the curriculum, and later studies (e.g., Kelly, 1997; Pate & High, 1995) found higher percentages of up to 60%. Along this line, there seems to be increased attention among scholars to the infusion of religion and spirituality into the counseling curriculum (Briggs & Rayle, 2002; Burke et al., 1999). In addition, the most recent standards published by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2001) give increased attention to the inclusion of spirituality and religion as one aspect of a person's culture. Thus, one apparent trend in counselor education is increased attention to religion and spirituality across the counseling curriculum.

A second trend seems to be an increase in the number of spirituality courses, most often taught as electives. In a recent study, Young et al. (2002) found that 23 of 94 CACREP-accredited counseling programs that were surveyed indicated that they offered a specific course on spirituality and religion in counseling. Nevertheless, many respondents indicated that they need additional training and curriculum guidelines to teach these concepts effectively.

One template for curricular experiences is the spirituality competencies that were developed at the Summit on Spirituality. In 1995, a group of experts met and produced a set of nine competencies that provide direction for counselors and counselor educators regarding how counselors can competently integrate issues related to spiritual and religious values in counseling. These nine competencies suggest that a counselor who is competent to integrate spirituality into the counseling process can do the following:

1. "Explain the relationship between religion and spirituality, including similarities and differences"
2. "Describe religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in a cultural context"
3. "Engage in self-exploration of his/her religious and spiritual beliefs in order to increase sensitivity, understanding and acceptance of his/ her belief system"
4. "Describe one's religious and/or spiritual belief system and explain various models of religious/spiritual development across the lifespan"

5. "Demonstrate sensitivity to and acceptance of a variety of religious and/or spiritual expressions in the client's communication"
6. "Identify the limits of one's understanding of a client's spiritual expression, and demonstrate appropriate referral skills and general possible referral sources"
7. "Assess the relevance of the spiritual domains in the client's therapeutic issues"
8. "Be sensitive to and respectful of the spiritual themes in the counseling process as befits each client's expressed preference"
9. "Use a client's spiritual beliefs in the pursuit of the client's therapeutic goals as befits the clients expressed preference" (Burke, 1998, p. 2)

To date, there has been limited attention to the curriculum in spirituality courses, with most authors using anecdotal accounts of their own pedagogical experiences (Curtis & Glass, 2002). What is missing from the literature is a more systematic investigation of curricular experiences in spirituality courses in counseling departments. Because this is a new area for counselor training programs, it is important to consider the content of these courses and to examine consistency with the guidelines created at the Summit on Spirituality.

The purpose of our study, then, was to conduct a content analysis of syllabi for introductory courses on spirituality in counselor education programs, with emphasis on course objectives, content, and assignments. We reviewed the syllabi using a framework based on the nine competencies that were developed at the Summit on Spirituality.

Method

Sampling

To begin the sampling process, we developed an initial list of 20 counselor educators. We developed this list from the findings of a previous research study (Young et al., 2002) and our personal knowledge of counseling programs in which spirituality courses were taught. These 20 faculty members were contacted by e-mail and asked to provide (a) an electronic copy of their syllabi and (b) information about other faculty members they knew who also were teaching a course in this area. Using a snowball sampling technique, we then contacted the educators whose names were sent to us in response to our initial e-mail with the same request. A total of 27 persons were contacted in this fashion. Of these, 3 persons did not respond, 7 respondents indicated that they did not teach a course on spirituality and religion in counseling, and 17 respondents submitted a syllabus. Of these 17 syllabi, 3 were not included in the analysis because they represented a more focused area of study (e.g., transpersonal psychology, Christian counseling) than was intended for the purposes of this research. As a result, 14 syllabi were reviewed for the purposes of this study. Although there was some geographic diversity represented in the sample, 10 of the syllabi (71.4%) were from the southern region of the United States.

Procedure

A content analysis was conducted on the 14 syllabi included in this study. Because the focus of this study was on the nine competencies developed at the Summit on Spirituality (Miller, 1999), these competencies were used as categories to evaluate course objectives and classroom lecture topics. In addition, course assignments and a bibliography of reading material were compiled.

Results

Course Objectives

In the 14 syllabi that we reviewed, there was a total of 73 objectives. All of the nine competencies were addressed, although not all competencies were addressed in each syllabus. One syllabus did not include any objectives, and 3 other syllabi had objectives that referenced no more than two competencies. Thus, 4 of the 14 syllabi (29%) did not specify objectives that were substantially consistent with the competencies. Conversely, 3 of the 14 syllabi (21%) contained objectives that addressed at least seven of the nine competencies. Table 1 contains detailed information about the frequency with which each competency was addressed as well as an example of an objective that matched a particular competency.

Course Topics and Classroom Activities

In addition to reviewing course objectives, we analyzed the lecture topics and classroom activities that were outlined in the syllabi within the context of the competencies. As with the objectives, all competencies were addressed in course topics, although not all competencies were addressed in each course. Competency 1 was included as a course topic in all 14 of the syllabi. Similarly, almost all of the syllabi ($n = 12$, 86%) included topics related to Competencies 2, 3, and 4. Competency 7 was addressed by course topics in 9 of the 14 syllabi (64%). Other competencies, however, were addressed between 1 and 7 times in the syllabi. Thus, Competencies 1 through 4 and Competency 7 received attention in the topic listings of the majority of the syllabi, but the other competencies were addressed less frequently.

TABLE 1

Frequency of References to Each Competency in Course Objectives and Sample Objectives ($N = 73$)

Competency	<i>n</i>	%	Example Course Objective
1	12	16.44	Know the basic belief systems of various spiritual systems, including the major world religions, indigenous peoples' spirituality, agnosticism, and atheism.
2	7	9.59	Understand culturally diverse expressions of spirituality, religion, and the transpersonal and how these concepts interact with mental health and wellness in different cultural traditions.
3	15	20.54	Understand and describe one's own spiritual perspective by identifying key events in one's life that contributed to the development of one's own spiritual perspective.
4	7	9.59	Apply spiritual development theory to facilitate client understanding of his or her present stage/status of life-span spiritual development.
5	1	1.37	Demonstrate openness to, empathy with, and acceptance of a variety of spiritual phenomena.
6	10	13.70	Identify when one's understanding and/or acceptance of the client's spiritual perspective is insufficient to adequately serve the client; know when to consult with professionals in the area of spirituality, including professionals the client considers a spiritual authority, when such consultation would enhance service to clients.
7	7	9.59	Learn various means of assessing spirituality with clients, including constructing a spiritual genogram, taking a religious history, and paper-and-pencil measures.
8	5	6.85	Use spiritual terms and concepts that are meaningful to the client.
9	9	12.33	Demonstrate competent use of techniques for remediation of problems with the facilitation of, enhancement of, and psychological integration of spiritual phenomena.

Assignments

Assignments for the courses were also reviewed. In addition to the typical assignments (in-class presentations by students, assigned readings, examinations, class attendance, and class participation), there were assignments that were unique to this type of course. For example, every syllabus asked students to engage in some type of spiritually based practice, although the parameters for this assignment varied. In many cases, this practice was specified as a weekly practice for the duration of the semester (i.e., meditation, contemplative prayer, or yoga; $n = 11$, 79%). Some instructors also required one-time attendance at a religious or spiritual activity/event that was different from the student's tradition ($n = 7$, 50%). The majority ($n = 11$, 79%) also required some type of autobiographical assignment. This took various forms, including a narrative autobiography, spirituality/religion lifeline, a spiritual genogram, or some combination of these. Other assignments, such as developing a treatment plan for a case study ($n = 6$, 43%), journaling about class-related experiences ($n = 6$, 43%), demonstration of counseling ($n = 1$, 7%), and developing an 8-week spiritual exploration workshop ($n = 1$, 7%) were also included.

Reading Assignments

As might be expected, there was tremendous diversity among the readings that were required or recommended for these courses. In addition, several instructors required readings that were self-selected by the students, and these readings were thus not included in reading lists. Appendix A contains a compiled bibliography of the readings from all syllabi. Appendix B contains a bibliography that we compiled to orient readers to each of the nine competencies.

Discussion

The counseling literature is replete with the argument that spiritual and religious values are a vital aspect of an individual's culture (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1997; Miller, 1999; Pate & Bondi, 1992). As stated by Dixon and Briggs (2000), the question is no longer "why" teach counselors to address issues related to spirituality and religion within the counseling curriculum, but "how" best to integrate this content. We conducted this study in an effort to examine the current practices of counselor educators who teach courses in this area.

Most notably, there was substantial variance in the extent to which the competencies developed by the Summit on Spirituality (Miller, 1999) influenced the curriculum. Several instructors clearly used the competencies in formulating course objectives and content. It seemed, however, that other instructors did not consider the competencies at all in developing their courses. Although no data exist to suggest that courses based on the competencies are superior, the competencies were the result of substantial work from noted experts in the areas of spirituality and religion; therefore, they might be considered a useful template for developing a syllabus for such courses.

As a result of the lack of a unifying model for teaching spirituality, there was substantial variation in the objectives and content of the syllabi. Although CACREP (2001) provided specific guidelines for core curricular experiences, the inclusion of spirituality and religion in the curricular experiences of counseling students was addressed in much less detail. The standards simply state that counselors-in-training ought to be "provided an understanding of the cultural context of relationships, issues, and trends in a multicultural and diverse society related to such factors as ... religious and spiritual values" (p. 61). We contend that the single best framework currently in existence for spirituality courses is the competencies that were developed by the Summit on Spirituality (Miller, 1999), and we encourage persons developing courses in spirituality to use this framework. The competencies are specific enough to provide direction for course objectives and content, while allowing instructors to individualize the course as they deem appropriate.

One historical obstacle to the development of courses integrating spirituality and religion into counseling has been the lack of seminal textbooks and readings. This problem has been largely eliminated, however, with the recent addition of new textbooks on spirituality that have been written specifically for counselors (e.g., Frame, 2002; Fukuyama Sevig, 1999; Miller, 2002). The problem remains, however, that although these authors may consider the competencies developed at the Summit on Spirituality, there is no single collection of writings that addresses these competencies as there is, for example, with the competencies in multicultural counseling (Sue et al., 1998). The need remains for a text that specifically addresses each of the competencies developed at the Summit on Spirituality.

The purpose of this article was to summarize the results of a content analysis of syllabi for spirituality courses. Although diversity would be expected across syllabi for any course, the lack of convergence among the 14 syllabi in this instance may indicate that more standardization of the curricular experiences for counseling students is warranted. In this way, students will be prepared to work as "spiritually competent" counselors with clients who present a diverse array of religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences.

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Appendix A:

Compilation of Reading Lists From the 14 Syllabi Reviewed by the Authors

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Appendix B:

Bibliography Compiled by the Authors to Orient Readers to Each of the Nine Competencies

Competency 1: The professional couriselor can explain the relationship between religion and spirituality, including similarities and differences.

Ingersoll, R. E. (1994). Spirituality, religion, and counseling: Dimensions and relationships. *Counseling and Values*, 38, 98-111.

Competency 2: The professional counselor can describe religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in a cultural context.

Fukuyama, M. A., & Sevig, T. D. (1999). The spiritual journal—worldviews. In M. A. Fukuyama & T. D. Sevig, *Integrating spirituality into multicultural counseling* (pp. 23-44). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Constantine, M. G. (1999), Spiritual and religious issues in counseling racial and ethnic minority populations: An introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 27, 179-181.

Competency 3: The professional counselor can engage in self-exploration of his/her religious and spiritual beliefs in order to increase sensitivity, understanding, and acceptance of his/her belief system.

Hinterkopf, E. (1994), Integrating spiritual experiences in counseling. *Counseling and Values*, 38, 165-75.

Competency 4: The professional counselor can describe one's religious and/or spiritual belief system and explain various models of religious/spiritual development across the lifespan.

Fowler, J. W. (2001). Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11, 159-172.

Competency 5: The professional counselor can demonstrate sensitivity and acceptance of a variety of religious and/or spiritual expressions in the client's communication.

Holden, J. M., Van Pelt-Tess, P., & Warren, S. (1999). Spiritual emergency: An introduction and case example. *Counseling and Values*, 43, 63-77.

Competency 6: The professional counselor can identify the limits of one's understanding of a client's spiritual expression, and demonstrate appropriate referral skills and general possible referral sources.

Faiver, C. M., O'Brien, E. M., & McNally, C. J. (1998). The friendly clergy: Characteristics and referral. *Counseling and Values*, 42, 217-221.

Competency 7: The professional counselor can assess the relevance of the spiritual domains in the client's therapeutic issues.

Kelly, E. W., Jr. (1995). Assessing the spiritual/religious dimension in counseling. In E. W. Kelly, *Spirituality and religion in counseling and psychotherapy: Diversity in theory and practice* (pp. 131-188). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Competency 8: The professional counselor can be sensitive to and respectful of the spiritual themes in the counseling process as befits each client's expressed preference.

Holden, J. M. (2000). Counselors' accounts of their clients' spiritual experiences. *Counseling and Values*, 44, 92-99.

Competency 9: The professional counselor can use a client's spiritual beliefs in the pursuit of the client's therapeutic goals as befits the client's expressed preference.

Kelly, E. W., Jr. (1995). Counseling approaches and techniques: Treatment intervention and the spiritual/religious dimension. In E. W. Kelly, *Spirituality and religion in counseling and psychotherapy: Diversity in theory and practice* (pp. 159-246). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.