

Diverse Contexts and Dynamics of Spiritual Transformation

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&

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What is a spiritual transformation and how does it manifest in diverse contexts and relationships? Although long recognized within the psychology of religion as an important phenomenon of study (e.g., James, 1902), the empirical study of spiritual transformation is demonstrating a resurgence with a considerable body of research now available (Koss-Chioino, 2006, 2013; Sandage & Moe, 2013). In contrast to most definitions of religious conversion, Pargament (2006) defines spiritual transformation broadly and references many types of experiences, both religious and spiritual in nature, generally outside organized religious contexts. “Spiritual transformation refers primarily to fundamental change of the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred as an object of significance in life, and secondarily to a fundamental change in the pathways an individual takes to the sacred” (Pargament, 2006, p. 21). Paloutzian (2005, 2013) has emphasized spiritual transformation as change in the ultimate concerns, values, meaning-making which can reshape life directions. These recent contributions have moved the topic of spiritual transformation beyond an earlier psychology of religion focus on religious conversion to areas such as spirituality and health, healing, positive psychology, mysticism, cultural and social transitions, post-traumatic growth, and clinical practice and training. An intriguing convergence is emerging for spiritual transformation research between theoretical perspectives emphasizing relational and depth dynamics, human capacities for growth and evolution, interpersonal neurobiology, and the significance of diversity and context.

This proposed interdisciplinary symposium will offer presentations representing a variety of models of spiritual transformation and research across diverse social cultural contexts, including nomadic peoples from the Kalahari, spirit healer doctors in Puerto Rico, and psychotherapists in Boston. We will consider spiritual transformation (a) at various levels of analysis ranging from neurobiology to systemic cultural processes, and (b) through differing pathways including indigenous healing practices, developmental processes, and clinical and training interventions.

Synergy and Spiritual Transformation:
Encouraging Renewable, and Expanding Mental Health Resources

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The teachings of Indigenous peoples, such as the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari Desert, express the intimate connection between spiritual transformation and education. A relevant concept is "education as transformation," which, building upon the acceptance of vulnerability, weaves together spirituality, healing and community mental health. A primary stimulus for and consequence of education as transformation is the experience of synergy. The experience of synergy emerges from the transpersonal, in particular the release and acceptance of experiences of spirituality in the everyday life of the community. But there also must be a functional dialectic between spiritual and socio-cultural transformation so change can actually occur.

Synergy occupies an essential place in the encouragement of mental health and development, across individual, group and community contexts. Often, valuable resources such as therapy and healing are in scarce supply, with access favoring those with power and prestige. But the experience of synergy offers a radical and innovative alternative. When synergy is released, valuable resources, such as healing, can expand and become renewable and accessible to all. As a result, a synergistic community can be formed where the good of one becomes the good of all, and the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Those previously denied access to valuable resources are now empowered, as they become active participants in the generation and utilization of those resources. Social justice, so critical to community health and development, is affirmed.

Spiritual Transformation and Psychic Experiences among Puerto Rican Doctors

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This presentation describes the findings of a qualitative study of Puerto Rican doctors' spirituality and their experiences of spiritual transformation. Seventy-four Puerto Rican doctors, representing all specialties except psychiatry, took part in a phenomenological exploration of spiritual ways of being and described how their spirituality and/or spiritual transformation had been integrated into their personal lives and their clinical practices.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using MAXQDA, open coding and grounded theory. All but three of the doctors were grouped according to their self-identification as religious, spiritual or Spiritist. The latter group follows a philosophy based on the teachings of a French visionary, Allan Kardec (1804–1859), who codified an ethical, spirit-based belief system (Spiritism). These practices and beliefs are popular in Latin America and are also found in many other countries, such as the Philippines and France.

Thirty-four doctors (24 Spiritist doctors, 9 doctors who identified themselves as “spiritual” and one religious doctor) described their experiences of spiritual transformation as having been initiated by one or more of four events: severe trauma, prolonged and/or highly distressful illness, the death of a beloved relative and/or intensive family interest in Spiritism and the reading of Kardec's books. Those doctors who experienced these events reported that they entered onto a pathway of change in worldview, in the meaning of their lives and in the ways they worked with patients. They developed a dependence upon and/or alliance with the sacred—whether conceived of as the spirit world (as in Spiritism), or as God, Jesus, Buddha or another personalized deity. In addition, another 25 doctors reported what we have labeled “transformative experiences,” extraordinary events emanating from the sacred. This paper will describe how transformative experiences affected the ways in which the doctors viewed their lives, their clinical work, and their patients.

Relational Spirituality and Transformation in Psychotherapy

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Spiritual transformation has been a perennial topic of interest for psychologists of religion and, more recently, for humanistic psychologists. In the past decade, there has been a broadening of the field arising from recognition that (a) people experience a variety of types of spiritual changes beyond an initial “conversion,” (b) spiritual changes occur outside explicitly religious contexts, (c) human are often active agents seeking meaningful change rather than simply passive recipients of “epiphanies,” and (d) relational dynamics are often influential in the processes of spiritual transformation (Paloutzian et al., 2013). This presentation will offer a brief overview of empirical research on spiritual transformation with an emphasis on recent trends and emerging questions (Sandage & Moe, 2013).

To date, spiritual transformation research has not been well-integrated with clinical practice. Sandage and colleagues have developed and empirically-tested a model of relational spirituality and transformation drawing on systems and relational development theories (e.g., Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Sandage, Link, & Jankowski, 2010; Sandage & Harden, 2011; Sandage, Hill, & Vaubel, 2011). This model suggests spirituality involves “ways of relating with the sacred” (Shults & Sandage, 2006, p. 161) with spiritual dwelling and seeking (Wuthnow, 1998) being important dialectical dimensions. Drawing on contemporary relational psychoanalysis and interpersonal neurobiology, we will outline key relational dynamics in psychotherapy which can facilitate constructive transformations in relational spirituality and mental health. These include attunement to attachment dynamics, metabolizing and repairing ruptures, intersubjectivity which invites mutual recognition, sensitive exploration of non-integrated terrain (e.g., sexuality, loss, trauma), and differentiated relating to elaborating the “thickness” (Geertz, 1973) of spiritual and diversity dynamics based on healthy pacing of clients. We also draw on diverse spiritual traditions to seek to integrate humanistic hopefulness about the potential for growth and transformation with a psychoanalytic appreciation for the formative roles of ambivalence, ambiguity, and conflict.

Spiritual Awareness Psychotherapy and Implications for Training

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Spiritual awareness psychotherapy (SAP) is a mode of treatment acknowledging the *spiritual presence* guiding treatment, providing insight and directing healing. This presence is the “sacred, powerful, and ultimately intelligent, loving force of creation... that goes by different names but is recognized by all sacred traditions” (Miller, 2011, p. 327). The spiritually oriented psychotherapist attends to the spiritual presence at all times in order to promote spiritual development beyond alleviating suffering. This development is witnessed in enhanced connection to the presence. Longitudinal studies indicate spirituality serves as a protective factor against depression in adults and adolescent girls and may impact developmental transformations (Desrosiers and Miller, 2007; Miller, Wickramaratne, Gameraff, Sage, Tenke, and Weissman, 2012). SAP gives clinicians a framework for promoting spiritual growth associated with positive well-being outcomes. It works by attending to the spiritual presence and conceptualizing client suffering as an opportunity for spiritual development. This is especially applicable for adolescents who are susceptible to spiritual growth, given the salient need for individuation associated with this developmental period (Miller, 2013).

In recent years, psychologists have recognized spiritual awareness as an important clinical competency (Vieten, Scammell, Pilato, Ammondson, Pargament and Lukoff, 2013). SAP requires clinicians to possess great spiritual awareness, beyond regard for the client’s beliefs. I present a model for spiritual awareness training composed of five phases: 1) validity of experience, 2) appreciation of whole self and whole other, 3) synchronicity: sacred, symbolic living, 4) awareness of the sacred universe and 5) dialectical living in the universe (Miller, 2011). This approach has been effective in ethnically and religiously diverse settings. Hundreds of students have transported themselves from a skepticism rooted in instrumental materialism to an appreciation of spiritual awareness (Miller, 2011). This personal transformation leaves burgeoning therapists better equipped to address the spiritual needs of clients.

The Role of the Body in Spiritual Transformation: An Embodied Cognition Perspective

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Starting with William James, most psychological investigations of spiritual transformation focus on more or less spontaneous, extraordinary, and instantaneous types of experiences (Loder, 1981; Sandage & Moe, 2013). But there is also, within every world religion, a tradition of ongoing and continuous spiritual practices (Jones, 2003). And most of these ongoing practices involve bodily disciplines (Yoga, Martial Arts like Tai Chi and Aikido, sitting and walking meditation, breathing exercises, chanting, etc). Research on embodied cognition finds that such embodied practices can transform our perceptual experience and cognitive processing and, when combined with research on neuroplasticity, also transform the neurological substrate of our perceiving and information processing. Much of our thinking is the simulation of bodily reactions (studies reviewed in Barsalou, 2008). Gestures “helps to accomplish thought” (Gallagher, 2005, 128; Goldin-Meadow, 2003; Krause, 1998; McGilchrist, 2009; McNeill, 2005). Even the most abstract thinking is represented in embodied metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson). Posture effects attention (Riskind & Gotay, 1982; Strack, 1988) and judgment (Wells & Petty, 1980). Extending a finger impacts interpersonal judgments (Cacioppo, et al., 1993; Chandler & Schwartz, 2009). Looking down or away improves recall (Glenberg, et al., 1998). Vision too requires the capacity for bodily stimulation (Gibbs, 2005). Likewise with hearing (Mottonen & Watkins, 2009; Pulvermuller, 2005; Willens et al., 2011). Embodied concerns shape what we see, hear, taste, sense and experience. People who imagined they were lifting a heavy weight were then able to lift heavier weights (Gibbs, 2005, 128). Hills look steeper and distances look longer if you are tired (Proffitt, 2006). Our maps of our experience are not representations but are the product of the dynamic interactions among our actions, physiologies, and cognitive processing systems. There is no simple, single set of neuronal connections and patterns infallibly associated with specific perceptual experiences. Neurological markings do not “represent” the world in some direct, literal way since patterns are constantly shifting and vary from individual to individual. Sensory experiences and their associated neurological activity leave the “bare” sensory inputs far behind. The same sight, sound, or smell may evoke different neuronal configurations in different individuals who, never the less, report the “same” experience (Freeman, 2001; Gibbs, 2005). A single physiological region may be involved in multiple cognitive activities and may underlay several different cognitive processes (Anderson 2008, 2010). The couplings between environmental stimuli and correlated neurological activity are highly distributed and inter-related in a complex, non-linear fashion (Van Orden et al., 2003; Holden, Van Orden & Turvey, 2009; Teske, 2013). This calls into question any epistemology that relies on modeling sense experience as a direct, linear, literal representation of external reality. Experience, including religious experience, is much more neurologically and phenomenologically complex than such models allow for. That we can intentionally undertake bodily practices (including spiritual disciplines) that reconfigure our experience of our phenomenological world and our processing information about it, and the correlated neurology, has profound implications for religious epistemology and spiritual transformation. This research, plus ongoing research on the effects of embodiment on specific religious practices, and their implications will be elaborated in this paper.

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