A Constructivist Perspective for Integrating Spirituality Into Counselor Training

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Significant efforts have been made in recent years to integrate training in spirituality and religion into counselor training programs. This article highlights issues that may be encountered by some trainees and suggests that constructivist teaching principles be used to mitigate these concerns. The authors present recommendations and activities in the context of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (2009) Spiritual Competencies.

Keywords: counselor education, spirituality, religion, ASERVIC, constructivism

The integration of spirituality and religion in counseling has been a topic of contention over the years, from Freud dismissing religion as mass neurosis to more modern concerns of ethics and values (Becker, 2009; Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006; Steen, Engels, & Thweatt, 2006). Despite these concerns, various studies have established the widespread importance of spirituality and religion in the lives of clients (Morrison, Clutter, Pritchett, & Demmitt, 2009; Steen et al., 2006; Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007) as well as the positive outcomes that can be achieved by including these issues in the counseling process (Steen et al., 2006; Young et al., 2007). As spirituality and religion become more accepted within counseling, the need for adequate training in these areas has become an important focus of research (Bishop, Avila-Juarbe, & Thumme, 2003; Cashwell & Young, 2004; Watkins van Asselt & Senstock, 2009; Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, & Belaire, 2002; Young et al., 2007).

Part of the effort to address counselor training in issues of spirituality and religion has been through the establishment of competencies and standards, mirroring a similar emphasis on standards for spiritual integration within psychology (Schafer, Handal, Brawer, & Ubinger, 2011), social work (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008), and medical professions (Culliford, 2009; Marr, Billings, & Weissman, 2007). In 1994, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) held a summit to discuss the importance of spiritual and religious issues in counseling, which led to the development of Spiritual and Religious Competencies for the counseling profession (G. Miller, 1999). These Spiritual Competencies, revised and approved in 2009, delineate the necessary awareness, knowledge, and skills counselors need to adequately address these issues in counseling (ASERVIC, 2009; Cashwell & Young, 2011).
Additionally, the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005) references the importance of spirituality and religion to many clients, and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) Standards include curricular guidelines to address spirituality and religion. Furthermore, the inclusion of multicultural competencies as essential components of counselor training also necessitates awareness, knowledge, and skills in the areas of spirituality and religion as important cultural considerations (Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007; Hage et al., 2006; M. M. Miller, Korinek, & Ivey, 2006; Watkins van Asselt & Senstock, 2009).

Many counselor education programs are incorporating spirituality and religion into course work as a result of recent literature and the establishment of counselor competencies (Curtis & Glass, 2002; Grams et al., 2007; Hage et al., 2006; M. M. Miller et al., 2006). Some programs have created courses dedicated to the study of spirituality and religion in counseling, although these courses have been mostly offered as electives (Cashwell & Young, 2004). Other programs have tried to meet competency standards by integrating spiritual and religious considerations throughout course content (Grams et al., 2007; Hage et al., 2006; Schafer et al., 2011) or in the context of clinical supervision (M. M. Miller et al., 2006). Cashwell and Young (2004) found that course syllabi varied widely in content and assessment, reflecting a lack of consistency and guidance for educators who wish to address this subject in the classroom. In addition, many faculty may be reluctant to teach on the topic because of their own perceived lack of training in the clinical application of spiritual and religious issues (Young et al., 2002).

Few articles to date provide suggestions for specific content or classroom management strategies when broaching the topic of spirituality and religion. In addition, the lack of a suggested framework to guide clinically relevant instruction most likely makes it difficult for graduate programs to develop effective teaching in these areas (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; Schafer et al., 2011). Some trainees expressed discomfort with the exploration of spirituality and religion in the secular classroom (Grams et al., 2007) and were worried about being judged or offending others (Souza, 2002). These concerns extended into clinical supervision, where supervisees expressed feeling hesitant to discuss questions related to spirituality and experienced supervisors as lacking sufficient training or willingness to discuss these issues within case conceptualizations (Bishop et al., 2003; Souza, 2002). Trainee fear and faculty discomfort suggest that programs must be intentional and sensitive in how they approach spiritual or religious discussions in the classroom. Cultivating an environment of exploration and openness to varying perspectives, rather than espousing a particular religious or spiritual philosophy, should be an essential component of any counselor training program (Hage et al., 2006; Hodge & Derezotes, 2008). Furthermore, with such variability in how spirituality and religion are taught, counselor educators may be challenged to include the competencies in their teaching and supervision appropriately (Grams et al., 2007; M. M. Miller et al., 2006). What is needed, then, is a model for instruction that acknowledges the value-laden nature of spirituality and religion for most trainees and offers a way to facilitate learn-
ing in a secular setting by exploring these values along with other perspectives (Hage et al., 2006; Watkins van Asselt & Senstock, 2009).

In this article, we suggest an approach that uses constructivist teaching principles as a strategy to address these concerns. We present specific suggestions, activities, and discussion questions related to major groupings of the ASERVIC (2009) Spiritual Competencies.

A Constructivist Remedy

Constructivism challenges traditional views of scientific inquiry as an objective and value-free means to absolute truth by positing that individuals are actively involved in meaning making, or formulating constructs based on their experiences in the world (Kelly, 1955; McAuliffe, 2011a). Specific to constructivist education are the principles of rejecting universal truths, becoming aware of the role of power within social discourse, and embracing difference and plurality (McAuliffe, 2011a; Watts, 2011). Educators who reject universals no longer see themselves as experts imparting knowledge to their trainees but rather as facilitators of trainee learning. To achieve this goal, educators can attend to the language they use, avoid rigid labels, challenge assumptions, and acknowledge the contextual nature of ideas and beliefs (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; McAuliffe, 2011b). It is also important to emphasize multiple perspectives, embrace differences, and encourage plurality (Hage et al., 2006; Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; Leseho, 2007; Watts, 2011). In the classroom, this means that special attention should be given to hearing a variety of viewpoints and perspectives (McAuliffe, 2011b). Constructivist educators also embrace reflexivity, or continually holding their own views open to critique and reflection as they engage trainees. Educators can facilitate this quality by encouraging trainees to attend to their own metacognitions. Trainees should be asked to be mindful of how they think about a topic and to reflect on their internal experiences related to the idea (McAuliffe, 2011b; Watts, 2011).

There are several other specific approaches to promoting a constructive environment. First, educators should emphasize the value of approximation instead of precision. Trainees should be encouraged to express “half-formed” ideas as they engage in class discussions and projects, thus allowing for the development of ideas rather than the search for a “right” answer. These changes may affect the way counselor educators evaluate trainees, focusing less on the attainment of knowledge and more on the process by which trainees come to their conclusions. Second, educators should personalize their teaching by connecting topics to trainees’ personal experiences, showing enthusiasm for the topics, being transparent about teaching methods, and giving individual feedback. Finally, to meet the needs of different developmental levels, educators should include discussions, group work, writing exercises, and questioning, along with modified lectures to engage trainees with particular concepts (McAuliffe, 2011b).

Related to these general strategies, two overarching ideas that can guide counselor educators’ implementation of constructivist strategies are (a) talking about it and (b) taking nothing for granted. First, avoiding discussions of spirituality and religion may communicate to trainees that these topics are not relevant or are perhaps viewed as harmful to the counseling process (Grimm, 1994). Whether trainees hold spiritual or religious beliefs or affiliate with a
belief system that plays an important role in their lives, they should be encouraged to listen to one another and build on the ideas generated (Hage et al., 2006; Lesheo, 2007; McAuliffe, 2011b). Talking about spiritual and religious concepts related to counseling during discussions can also promote relativism when varying views are shared, examined, and reflected upon (Hage et al., 2006; McAuliffe, 2011b). Additionally, bringing up spiritual and religious issues within a counseling program may help trainees become more comfortable addressing related issues with clients and more knowledgeable about beliefs and values that differ from their own.

The second idea, taking nothing for granted, relates to counselor educators not assuming trainees share the same values or perspectives simply because they are enrolled in a counseling program. Educators can inadvertently reinforce power differentials in the classroom by supporting certain ideas and challenging others (McAuliffe, 2011a). Given this subtle method of influence, speaking in a way that assumes trainees share the instructor’s viewpoint is in itself a coercive message. It is important for counselor educators not to make assumptions about the values and ethical standards embraced by counselor trainees.

In sum, constructivist principles and strategies may be particularly useful for teaching that is related to spirituality and religion in that they create a nonjudgmental learning environment, encourage diverse values, and give trainees the authority to be cocreators of knowledge. Although further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of constructivist educational strategies in counselor education, there is support for their use in other fields, such as improving nurses’ cultural competence (Hunter & Krantz, 2010) and altering teachers’ attitudes toward human rights (Gündoğdu, 2010).

**Integrating Constructivist Principles in Spirituality Discussions**

Building on a constructivist ethos, the ASERVIC (2009) Spiritual Competencies provide a framework for integrating training in spirituality and religion into the counseling curriculum (Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Cashwell & Watts, 2010). The competencies go beyond more general principles found in multicultural counseling competencies and ethical standards related to spirituality and religion. Additionally, Robertson (2010) provided empirical support for the competencies and developed a Spiritual Competency Scale that could be used to evaluate the extent to which training programs are successful in promoting competence among trainees. ASERVIC’s 14 competencies are organized into the following six categories: Culture and Worldview, Counselor Self-Awareness, Human and Spiritual Development, Communication, Assessment, and Diagnosis and Treatment (Cashwell & Watts, 2010).

**Culture and Worldview**

The first two competencies are under the category of Culture and Worldview. The professional counselor should be able to describe the similarities and differences between spirituality and religion, including the basic beliefs of various spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism, and atheism (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). The professional counselor should also recognize that the client’s beliefs (or absence of beliefs) are central to his or her worldview and can influ-
ence psychosocial functioning. In instruction related to these competencies, a constructivist emphasis on different perspectives would suggest covering diverse topics related to various cultures and worldviews and exploring different viewpoints on the importance of spirituality or religion in people’s lives (Hage et al., 2006). Trainees could also be encouraged to examine both similarities and differences of various beliefs (Cashwell, 2009). Trainees could be assigned to read a book such as God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions of the World and Why Their Differences Matter (Prothero, 2010) to better understand the different goals and questions asked and answered by the various religions of the world, as well as the cultural and historical contexts of those religions. Understanding these fundamental differences can help future counselors avoid making false assumptions about spirituality and religious values (Cashwell, 2009).

Although knowledge associated with culture and worldview may provide trainees with an important theoretical foundation, trainees may not perceive that their own spiritual or religious beliefs fit into a particular belief system and may be resistant to the idea that a belief or lack of belief has a significant impact on one’s life. From a constructivist perspective, this discrepancy would be a danger in didactic approaches in which the instructor functions in the role of an expert (McAuliffe, 2011a). For this reason, participatory activities can be particularly useful. For example, rather than teaching on the difference between spirituality and religion, an educator could instead have trainees come up with their own definitions. Similarly, rather than insisting on the importance of spirituality and religion to one’s psychosocial functioning, educators could have the class share different perspectives and promote discussion between dissenting viewpoints. A key aspect of discussions would be valuing the personal experiences of trainees and promoting dialogue that highlights alternative interpretations.

An additional component that can supplement didactic instruction is to ask trainees to complete a course diary. A course diary involves trainees’ written reflections on various classes during the semester regarding the material presented and the application of principles to their own experiences (Mayo, 2004b). This form of autobiographical and constructive narration encourages active participation of trainees in the learning process and requires meaningful reflection. This reflection furthermore gives weight to the trainees’ personal experiences as part of the learning process (Mayo, 2004b). Mayo (2004b) found that the use of course diaries increased trainees’ ability to understand and apply concepts from the class.

Some process questions that may be helpful for exploring diverse views include the following: How would you describe or define religion? How would you define spirituality? What importance do you believe one’s spirituality or religion has on someone’s life? What worldviews or perspectives have we left out of this discussion? Are there any viewpoints that have not been represented or have been described in a way that you disagree with? What do you see as important similarities and differences between various beliefs?

Counselor Self-Awareness

The next three competencies are under the category of Counselor Self-Awareness. The professional counselor should actively explore his or her
own attitudes, beliefs, and values about spirituality and religion (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). The professional counselor should also continuously evaluate the influence of his or her own spiritual or religious beliefs on the client and the counseling process, identify the limits of his or her understanding of the client’s spiritual perspective, and be acquainted with religious and spiritual leaders who can be avenues for consultation referral.

Constructivist principles are particularly useful for encouraging self-exploration because they create a nonjudgmental environment in which trainees feel free to express diverse attitudes, beliefs, and values (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008). When encouraging trainees to consider the impact of their spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values on clients, an educator may find it helpful to begin with a broader discussion of how beliefs and values in general may influence the counseling process. Proceeding in this manner could be more inclusive of individuals who do not think in terms of spirituality and religion and may allow them to better see the connection between spiritual and religious beliefs and values and their own beliefs and values. Additionally, this broader understanding of the influence of one’s beliefs and values is a part of multicultural counseling competence (Arrendondo et al., 1996).

An activity that may be useful for exploring one’s own attitudes, beliefs, and values and their potential influence on counseling would be to use case studies of clients with different religious and spiritual beliefs and values. In one approach, trainees could be asked to develop various case scenarios in groups and then present them to the class. Trainees could record their initial reactions and concerns for each client. Important facets of this activity would be to include diverse clients with different beliefs and values and to solicit trainee feedback on how they feel particular clients are characterized. Case-based instruction supports a constructivist approach by engaging trainees actively in the learning process through reflective thinking and promoting trainee interaction (Mayo, 2004a). Additionally, positive outcomes have been found from using case-based activities within a psychology course, with findings that such activity “stimulates academic challenge, bolsters personal interest and involvement in the subject matter, and offers a sharply realistic perspective from which to apply course content” (Mayo, 2004a, p. 142).

Discussion questions that may be helpful to use with trainees related to these competencies include the following: How do you see your own values as influencing clients or counseling sessions? How could these values relate to one’s religious or spiritual beliefs or values? Related to spirituality and religion, what beliefs or values might you associate with clients whom you would find difficult to work with? Who or where would you feel comfortable referring clients with spiritual and religious concerns? From what resources would you consider seeking support if you needed to consult on a client with concerns related to religious or spiritual beliefs or values?

**Human and Spiritual Development**

The next spiritual competency is listed under the category of Human and Spiritual Development. The professional counselor can describe and apply various models of spiritual and/or religious development and their relationship to hu-
man development (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Instruction related to this spiritual competency can encourage trainees to critique existing models of spiritual and religious development and explore models in the context of their own lives.

Constructivist principles encourage active reflection, which promotes trainees’ understanding of how they came to hold particular beliefs. By reflecting on what has influenced their own beliefs, trainees may better understand and value how others can arrive at different beliefs (McAuliffe & Milliken, 2009). An activity that can encourage reflection regarding human and spiritual development is to ask trainees to create a spiritual genogram. As a variation of a family genogram, a spiritual genogram similarly creates a graphical representation of a family’s history of spiritual or religious beliefs and values, with special attention given to noting shifts in beliefs within the family (Willow, Tobin, & Toner, 2009). A spiritual genogram can also incorporate the role of spiritual mentors and teachers as well as note significant events in which a trainee’s own beliefs or values changed. For trainees who do not hold spiritual or religious beliefs, this genogram could still be useful for examining alignment with their family beliefs and for exploring changes in beliefs over generations.

Using a spiritual genogram in a counseling and spirituality course, Willow et al. (2009) found that it promoted an expansion of trainees’ worldviews, a better understanding of the worldview of others, and an increase in trainees’ ability to listen and attend to issues related to spirituality and religion that may arise in counseling. An additional benefit of assigning the spiritual genogram to trainees is that it provides an activity that may be used with clients.

Some questions to guide discussion about spiritual and human development models include the following: How do these models fit or not fit with your view of spiritual and/or religious development? What do you view as significant influences on one’s spiritual and/or religious development?

**Communication**

The next three competencies fall under the Communication category. The professional counselor should respond to a client’s spirituality and/or religious beliefs with acceptance, use concepts that are consistent with the client’s spiritual and/or religious perspectives, recognize spiritual and/or religious themes in client communication, and be able to address these with the client (Cashwell & Watts, 2010).

By promoting dialogue between dissenting views, constructivist teachers create an opportunity for counselors-in-training to practice engaging in discussions with clients with different beliefs. Of central importance is that trainees are free to express and explore their attitudes within the classroom and engage with other trainees. It is important for educators not only to guide discussions and manage conflict but also to avoid silencing or judging viewpoints.

Because diversity may be limited among trainees in counselor training programs, emersion experiences have been recommended to enhance multicultural training by exposing trainees to a wider variety of cultures (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005). Furthermore, immersion experiences can be a step toward becoming involved with minority groups in community settings, which is a component of multicultural competence (Arredondo et al., 1996). O’Connor (2004) adapted an immersion activity for a spirituality
and religion course by requiring trainees to attend a spiritual or religious activity that was unfamiliar to them and to write a reflection paper.

Discussion questions that may be incorporated include the following: How might clients with particular religious or spiritual beliefs and values want to be engaged in those beliefs and values? What concerns would you have discussing this subject with the client? When do you feel it is therapeutically relevant to address spiritual or religious themes that you recognize in the client's life?

**Assessment**

The 10th competency is listed under the category of Assessment. During the intake and assessment processes, the professional counselor strives to understand a client’s spiritual and/or religious perspective by gathering information from the client (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). In addressing this area with trainees, an educator using a constructivist approach might engage trainees by exploring the different values trainees place on assessing a client’s spiritual and religious beliefs and considering trainees’ own perceptions of helpful and harmful strategies for conducting this assessment.

A useful activity would be to have trainees evaluate existing intake questionnaires and assessments related to spirituality and religion. Trainees could be asked to come up with possible client responses to these tools based on different spiritual and religious beliefs. Being asked to explore potential client responses encourages trainees to think from others’ perspectives. A component of evaluating assessments would be to look for bias related to spiritual and religious values. Additionally, trainees can take self-assessments, such as the Spiritual Competency Scale (Robertson, 2010), to gain awareness of their own strengths and limitations and identify areas for future growth. Discussion of items on self-assessments may also elicit participation within the classroom as trainees explore and discuss the different dimensions of spiritual competency.

Process questions might include the following: What is the value of collecting information about a client’s spiritual and religious beliefs as part of an intake and assessment? What are the risks? What are some appropriate questions to ask if you wanted to learn more about a client’s spiritual and/or religious beliefs and values? What are questions that you feel counselors should avoid? How would you feel as a client being asked these questions? What can you do to add to your own spiritual competency?

**Diagnosis and Treatment**

The final four competencies fall under the category of Diagnosis and Treatment. When making a diagnosis, the professional counselor recognizes that the client’s spiritual and/or religious perspective can affect well-being and contribute to the problem (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Goals should be consistent with the client’s spiritual and/or religious perspectives. The professional counselor should modify techniques to include a client’s spiritual and/or religious perspectives, use spiritual and/or religious practices as techniques when appropriate and acceptable to a client’s viewpoint, and apply theory and current research supporting the inclusion of a client’s spiritual and/or religious perspectives and practices.
Constructivist views on diagnosis recognize that evaluation of clients’ behavior is socially and historically embedded (White, 2001). Considering the assumption that counselors cannot detach themselves from their current social context, the discussion of diagnosis and treatment may invite the most conflict in class because of different perspectives of what is considered healthy or unhealthy. Many viewpoints are likely to be represented about how one’s religious beliefs may be beneficial or problematic for a client and whether it is appropriate for a counselor to challenge beliefs perceived as problematic. Additionally, there are likely to be diverse viewpoints and concerns about the use of various related techniques and interventions. Thus, it will be important for educators to encourage trainees’ exploration of different viewpoints and strategies that might guide a counselor’s decision making and allow for a broader consideration of potential diagnoses and effective treatments (White, 2001).

For this group of competencies, the use of role plays can be an effective way to encourage discussion and solicit trainee feedback. Role plays have been noted throughout counselor education as a tool to provide opportunities for trainees to connect knowledge with practice and to increase trainee comfort in the counselor role (Smith, 2009). From a constructivist perspective, role plays create meaningful experiences whereby trainees explore ways to address complex cases from different perspectives. As a specific example of a role-play activity, trainees could be responsible for creating scenarios in which they believe spiritual or religious beliefs may be relevant for a client and then identifying interventions to address them.

Process questions to explore include the following: In what ways might spirituality or religion enhance a client’s well-being? In what ways might spirituality or religion be a source of problems or exacerbate symptoms? Is there such a thing as good religion or bad religion, good spirituality or bad spirituality? What right/responsibility do we as counselors have in engaging clients’ beliefs that we may view as contributing to their problems or symptoms? What place do spiritual-based or religious-based techniques have in counseling sessions?

Conclusion and Future Directions

As the counseling field integrates spirituality and religion into training and practice, a once taboo subject is now a part of professional standards and ethical codes. Although questions may remain about the place and function of spirituality and religion in counseling, facing these issues within training programs rather than avoiding them will allow a more constructive context for exploring their implications and value. Approaching the topic through a constructivist lens can provide a framework for addressing competencies by creating a nonjudgmental environment, encouraging the exploration of diverse values, and empowering trainees as cocreators of knowledge.

The discussions and activities suggested here can initiate this endeavor and can be incorporated into an existing multicultural course, added as a separate course on spirituality and religion in counseling, or interspersed among several existing courses within the curriculum. Because constructivist strategies rely on the cocreation of knowledge within the classroom, counselor educators need not believe that they must be experts on spiritual
and religious differences to incorporate these subjects in their teaching. This may help those who feel unprepared to tackle these themes, allowing them to emphasize learning from multiple sources and perspectives rather than acting as an authority on the subject. What is needed, however, is for educators to be aware of their own identity and potential biases regarding spirituality and religion and be intentional about maintaining a nonjudgmental and inclusive attitude throughout instruction.

In addition to evaluating the methods proposed in this article, there continues to be a need for identifying and validating best practices, as well as having a broader understanding of how spirituality and religion can be applied in clinical settings. Further attention should also be paid to potential ethical considerations regarding the incorporation of spiritual and religious issues in teaching and counseling settings.

References


