

# Women and Spirituality: An Experiential Group for Female Graduate Students

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Spirituality has received increasing attention as an area to be considered in counseling and college student development, but little has been written about specific interventions to address college students' spiritual needs. The authors present the format, content, and outcomes of an experiential group that was established to facilitate women's spiritual exploration and development.

Currently, significant national attention is being paid to the role of spirituality in people's mental health and well-being (Bullis, 1996; Favier, Engersoll, O'Brien, & McNally, 2001; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999, 2002; Kelly, 1995; W. R. Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). Coinciding with this trend, there has been a growing interest in addressing college students' spiritual needs and development (Love, 2001; V. W. Miller & Ryan, 2001; Rogers & Dantley, 2001). This has included an increased awareness and dialogue within and among staff at college counseling centers about the ways to address spiritual matters when treating student mental health needs. For example, a survey of college counselors found that more than 70% were open to the discussion and use of the topics of religion and spirituality in counseling (Weinstein, Parker, & Archer, 2002). Also students in counseling programs have supported the need for training in this area (Souza, 2002).

College students have a clear need for counselors who are open to addressing their spiritual concerns. The literature in this area suggests that religious and spiritual concerns are a focus for many college students and may often be related to psychological distress. A recent study reported that of 5,472 undergraduates and graduate students, 26% reported considerable distress related to religious or spiritual matters. These spiritual concerns were also significantly associated with distress about loss of a relationship, sexual assault, confusion about values, homesickness, and suicidal ideation, all typical issues addressed by counseling center staff (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). Schafer (1997) explored the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, and distress among college undergraduates. He found that students who placed a high importance on religion had higher personal distress than did those who placed less importance on religion. Students who believed more or less strongly in

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God had higher distress than did those who were ambivalent or unsure about the existence of God. And finally, students who had a sense of meaning had lower distress than did students who lacked a sense of meaning.

Despite the need for counseling services and programs to address spiritual concerns (Weinstein et al., 2002), there is little information about clinical interventions in use that have a spiritual focus. The only information we found on a specific intervention was a brief article from 1990 describing a group on spirituality conducted at a college counseling center (Genia, 1990). This interreligious/spiritual exploration group offered at the University of Pennsylvania was an unstructured, 10-session group designed to provide a supportive and spiritually diverse forum for students to address their personal concerns in the areas of religion and spirituality. The author of the study did not specify whether the group intervention included undergraduates, graduate students, or both of these student populations (Genia, 1990). In the current article, we describe the process, format, and content of an experiential group that was developed and implemented for graduate women interested in exploring spiritual identity issues at a college counseling center, and we examine the themes and outcomes that resulted from this group's sessions. The facilitators chose to limit the group to graduate students because of their potential developmental differences from undergraduates in their spiritual identity (Parks, 2000). Also, we decided to focus the group on women because of the literature suggesting that the paths and challenges posed in women's spiritual development differ from those of men (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Christ, 1995; Gilligan, 1993). The group setting was intended to provide the participants with a safe space to explore their own spirituality and benefit from sharing their experiences with a community of other women.

## Women and Spirituality: Sharing Our Stories Experiential Group

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### Workshop Promotion, Scheduling, and Screening

The group was promoted both internally, at the counseling center, and externally, in the university community, using advertisements posted in the counseling center, flyers posted in targeted areas of the campus, and by e-mail. The group was described as one that would explore "the ways in which women develop spiritually, the links between mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health, creating space for spiritual exploration in our lives, and sharing of our experiences as we work to find our own unique paths." The majority of referrals to the group resulted from an e-mail advertisement to graduate students. Group members informed us that this advertisement was sometimes forwarded to them by multiple individuals, such as administrators, advisers, and friends.

The group was scheduled to meet during the spring semester, traditionally a more difficult time to recruit new group members than the regular school year (i.e., the fall and winter semesters). However, because of the significant response to external promotion, a group of 8 women was easily formed, and a waiting list

was formed for a second group that met during the summer semester. A description of the issues and themes that emerged from both of these groups follows.

At the time the women and spirituality group was conducted, we (the authors, who served as group facilitators) were predoctoral interns at the University of Michigan Counseling Center. We are both European American and in our mid-30s. We come from diverse spiritual backgrounds and practices. Both of us have been interested in and have sought additional training in the intersections of spirituality and counseling as well as in issues of religion and spirituality for college students.

We conducted screening interviews by telephone with each interested student to assess the fit between the student's goals and the focus of the group, the degree of openness and comfort the student had in meeting with a diverse group in which multiple points of view would be presented, and to assess whether the group member would likely function effectively in a group setting that addressed potentially affectively charged issues. From an initial pool of 20 students who expressed interest in the group, the screening process enabled us to identify 2 students who had goals that were incompatible with the focus of the group. An additional 4 students from the waiting list had scheduling conflicts during the summer semester and were unable to participate in the group meetings. Eight women participated in the first group and 6 in the second group. Group members ranged in age from their early 20s to their mid-30s. The members were all graduate students and were diverse in terms of ethnic/racial background, religious background, and current spiritual/religious practice.

## Workshop Format and Content

The groups met four times during the course of 4 weeks for 1½ hours each week. The groups met at the counseling and psychological services center of the University of Michigan in a room referred to by the staff as the "serenity room." This meeting room was large enough for group members to sit in a circle or to spread out during exercises, while retaining a feeling of togetherness. The room, which also served as the counseling center's library, was decorated in a way that was intended to evoke a sense of warmth and tranquility and included many accessories such as plants, baskets, collections of stones, and a decorative water fountain. The personal growth group format consisted of exercises designed to stimulate thinking and discussion on personal meanings of spirituality; the role of ritual in one's life; and women's unique perspective on spirituality, community, and one's spiritual journey or path.

*Session 1.* The first group meeting began with introductions, presentation of the format of the group, and discussion of the ground rules to enhance the group's effectiveness, including maintaining confidentiality and respecting differences in group members' beliefs and opinions. Two exercises were used to foster thoughts about the meaning of spirituality and how spirituality interacted with other aspects of group participants' lives. The first exercise was a structured free-association exercise that was used to stimulate the development of a personal, working definition of spirituality. Group members

completed this exercise individually and then shared their initial conceptualizations as a group. From this exercise, themes emerged such as the role of nature in spirituality, relationship to God, personal nature of discovery, spirituality as a new focus, challenges defining spirituality, and the interaction between spirituality and religion.

For the second exercise, sheets of paper were hung in different parts of the room that represented various areas that might be challenging for the women in their exploration of their spirituality, such as institutions, family, community, balance, and defining spirituality. Group members then moved to the area in which they were struggling most with their spirituality. From this position, each group member shared her reason for selecting this area. A second round of this exercise was conducted, with group members expanding on another area of challenge in their spiritual lives. Members discussed issues including looking for a religious or spiritual community, working toward balance, integration of spiritual/religious practice with professional identity, and dealing with religious/spiritual issues in the family. To close this first session, feedback was solicited about the members' reactions to the first group meeting. For homework, group members were asked to reflect on the ways in which they brought spirituality into their daily lives.

*Session 2.* Session 2 began with a group check-in to facilitate sharing of group participants' reactions to the first group session and of how the group was affecting their lives. As an introduction to the discussion of ritual, the leaders shared a collection of quotations about ritual from diverse authors. Group members took turns in reading the quotations aloud. This was followed by the discussion of reactions to the quotations and sharing thoughts about the role of ritual and other practices that connected group members to the spiritual in their lives. The second exercise of the session, taken from Fukuyama and Sevig (1999), consisted of free-form writing in response to the sentence stem "If God were a she..." After a period of individual reflection, group members shared their reactions and discussed the impact that being a woman has on their spiritual lives. Some themes that emerged from these groups included childhood influences, particularly grandmothers, on spiritual development and looking for female religious or spiritual images or leaders. To prepare for the last two sessions, group members were asked to reflect during the week on their spiritual journeys throughout their life span.

*Session 3.* After a group check-in, we introduced an exercise to facilitate the creation of a visual representation of each group member's spiritual journey. We provided the example, developed by the Reverend Ann Cherry (Bullis, 1996), of using a cherry tree to represent various aspects of the spiritual journey, incorporating a past, present, and future time span. We gave the group members a wide array of art supplies that they used to create a visual representation of various aspects of their journeys. In the second half of the group session, several group members shared their depictions of their spiritual journeys with the group.

*Session 4.* Session 4 focused on continuing group members' symbolic presentations of their spiritual journeys. As in the previous session, group members

asked questions and shared reactions after each member's presentation. In this session, we also provided unstructured time for group members to reflect on the themes of the group and to discuss issues of ongoing concern for them. For the final group exercise, group members wrote down a short list of specific actions they intended to take to continue exploring spirituality in their lives. The sharing of these lists was incorporated into the closing of the group sessions. The last two sessions (i.e., 3 and 4) brought out issues related to a "coming out" process of revealing the spiritual side of one's identity, obstacles to spiritual exploration within oneself, and the spiritual journey as a process rather than an end point.

### Unique Themes From the Two Groups

In addition to the themes already described, the first group also explored themes of integration of spirituality versus separation or compartmentalization, needing connection with women based on spirituality, the difficulty of connecting with men regarding spiritual issues. The second group explored the interplay between religion/spirituality and science; grief, loss, and crisis as a catalyst for spiritual seeking; the privilege of organized religion; and tolerating uncertainty and the struggle involved with spiritual exploration.

### Outcomes From the Two Groups

When the group members came together for the last time, the women shared their experience of the group as well as their "next steps." The outcomes reported by the group members included a reduction in distress related to spiritual issues in family, friendship, and professional environments in addition to a greater sense of spiritual well-being and empowerment. They found the exercises useful in stimulating thought and gaining insight. The sense of community with other women who were struggling with similar issues was also helpful to their own process. Several members reported positive changes or steps they had taken on their journey during the group sessions, such as increased confidence in the ability to communicate beliefs (e.g., sharing with a professor thoughts about the relationship between spiritual beliefs and professional life); creating space for reflection, prayer, or meditation; reconnecting with or exploring new rituals; exploring religious/spiritual communities; deciding to have a dialogue about spiritual beliefs with family; deciding to convert to another religion; and reframing daily rituals as opportunities for mindful reflection and experiencing such rituals as spiritual.

### Postgroup Issues

Seven months after the second group ended, a draft of the written description (e.g., literature review, themes and outcomes, conclusions) of the group was sent through e-mail to the participants for their feedback and comments. Seven participants sent lengthy e-mails describing personal changes that had occurred since their participation in the group and that they attributed to their membership in the group. Notable in the feedback was that participants

continued to be in contact with one another and felt that the other group members had become integrated into their support systems. In their feedback, members noted the importance of talking about spiritual issues within a noninstitutionalized (religious) community, the diversity of the groups, and the group's safe and nonjudgmental atmosphere. One woman described in the follow-up that "the group was so diverse that it was impossible for there to exist a pressure to conform to any accepted religious doctrine."

## Conclusion

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The experiential group focusing on women's spiritual exploration and identity development presented in this article offers an example of one way to approach a spiritually focused intervention. Future work needs to include an exploration of different ways to organize and conduct such a group, including number of sessions, number of participants, addressing the specific needs of undergraduates and graduate students as well as students from different identity groups, exercises used, and whether to conduct this intervention as a workshop or as a process group. Other areas for exploration include the benefits of groups for men and for mixed gender groups. Although the women in these groups were happy to have a space exclusively for women, they expressed a desire for men to have a space to do similar work and a willingness to have a mixed-gender group that would allow for dialogue between the sexes. In sum, the interest expressed in the women and spirituality group on the University of Michigan campus and the positive outcomes of this intervention suggest that a group focusing on spiritual exploration and identity development within the setting of a college counseling center may serve a need not being currently addressed by other services on college campuses.

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