Expanding a Framework for a Non-Ideological Conceptualization of Spirituality in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT
A review of the broad and varying conceptualizations of spirituality inform the critical need to categorize such conceptualizations. One such categorization, suggested by this paper, is a simple division between those conceptualizations which are more closely tied to religion and those which are not. This stance leads to the proposition that non-ideological conceptualizations are more suited for the workplace. This paper highlights limitations of more ideological conceptualizations, presents the development of non-ideological conceptualizations derived from nearly universal values, and expands upon a non-ideological workplace model.

Introduction
For more than a decade there has been a growing trend in corporate America to acknowledge manifestations of spirituality at work (Brandt, 1996; Fry, 2005). Several explanations have been offered as to why spirituality at work has become an important issue. One explanation is the growing concern for work-life balance prevalent today. Workplaces in general, and Extended Work Hour Culture workplaces specifically, have become impersonal and even insecure environments (Fry & Cohen, 2009). Increasing workplace spirituality is viewed as one possible antidote for this trend.

However, in today’s politically correct environment organizations are understandably wary of opening discussions and meaningful dialogues about spirituality because of the potential to offend. This wariness of spirituality may also be due to the fact that spirituality has often been understood as no different than, and therefore has received similar treatment by organizations as, religiosity. Therefore, in order to address spirituality in the workplace, it is critical to understand that spirituality and religiosity need not be viewed or treated as synonymous. Distinctions can be made, and it is these distinctions which may help determine whether the expression is welcomed or viewed as beneficial in the workplace. Many hold that spirituality (or being spiritual) is not the same as being ‘religious’ because spirituality has to do with universal human experience, whereas religion has to do with the articulation and perhaps propagation of a particular ideology (Brandt, 1996; Maher & Hunt, 1993; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Spirituality, therefore, may be understood as describing the expression (or fulfillment) of more universal innate human needs. In contrast, religion is understood as a more prescriptive expression of a specific, shared, but not universal set of beliefs or practices. This descriptive versus prescriptive characterization is but one way to begin to differentiate between the two. But religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive.
Some researchers even suggest that religion may be understood as a subset of spirituality (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008; White, 2003).

This paper reviews and critiques several very diverse conceptualizations of spirituality for the purposes of 1) suggesting the need to effectively categorize or sort these conceptualizations, 2) applying this categorization in order to ‘judge’ a conceptualization as to its probable fit within the (Western, secular) workplace, and 3) proposing the extension of a non-ideological model of workplace spirituality. This final framework connects and extends several conceptualizations of spirituality rooted in the identification of universally recognized positive human values or virtues, rejects overtly ideological components of a conceptualization which conflict with other expressions of spirituality, while explicitly championing the need for more of this humanistic spirituality in the workplace.

Various Conceptualizations of Spirituality

Conceptualizations of spirituality are exceedingly diverse. Some have claimed that the construct can be defined in hundreds of ways (Dent, Higgins, & Wharff, 2005; Strack, Fottler, Wheatley, & Sodomka, 2002). Because of this diversity, it is useful to possess a framework through which to view these conceptualizations before discussing their place within an organization/workplace. For example, prescriptive conceptualizations will most often be judged religious; whereas descriptive conceptualizations of experiences universal to mankind will be judged as more spiritual in nature, but not necessarily as religious.

Other terms can be attached to the poles of similarly evaluative continuums. These poles represent the extremes or anchors of salient characteristics of a conceptualization. These continuums are not dichotomies. They are not either-or. A particular conceptualization will simply express itself as more or less one of the poles, or anchors, than the other. However, these terms tend to align themselves such that a mental composite of terms on each pole can aid us in categorizing (judging) a conceptualization under consideration (see Table 1).

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Failure to make distinctions (judgments) about conceptualizations may be why organizations remain skeptical of all expressions of spirituality in the workplace. This concept may best be understood by first examining several conceptualizations which share characteristics from one extreme of Table 1. We will then examine contrasting conceptualizations.

**Religious/ideological conceptualizations of spirituality**

Karasu (1999) believed spirituality required a belief system comprised of three general elements: belief in the sacred; belief in the unity; and belief in transformation. Belief in the sacred was described as ordinary things being experienced as extraordinary. Belief in the unity was described as a sense of being undifferentiated from the outside world. Finally, belief in transformation was described as belief in spiritual continuity and rebirth; coming to terms with one’s ending; seeing all endings as potential beginnings and all beginnings as having an end (Karasu, 1999). This elaboration of belief system asserted ideological components not universally shared; for several major religions do espouse uniqueness (differentiation) for man, and not all religions accept this (ideological) explanation of transformation. Still other religions deny any past or future existence; believing that this life is all there is.

Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders (1988) defined spirituality as an awareness of a transcendent dimension characterized by certain identifiable values related to self, others, nature, life, and what one considers to be the Ultimate. They identified nine phenomenological components of spirituality: transcendent dimension, meaning and purpose in life, mission in life, sacredness in life, material values, altruism, idealism, awareness of the tragic, and fruits of spirituality. Some of these proffered components such as altruism have been recognized as a nearly universal virtue, but other components they included, such as a transcendent dimension and an anti-material sentiment, are not universally shared, but instead show a strong bent toward transcendent and existential ideologies.

Spirituality has also been articulated as a process or series of developmental stages (Adams, 1996; Benefiel, 2005; Day, 2007). Adams (1996) asserted that tapping into the spirit would lead to a three-stage phenomenon of experiencing the sacred. The first stage of experiencing the sacred was moving beyond one’s egoic sense of self and world. Similar to Elkins et al (1988), this stage referred to experiencing one’s environment as sacred space. As this experience began, one moved into, and continued to experience through alternate modes of consciousness. For Adams (1996) transition, revelation, transcendence, and transformation composed the second stage of experiencing the sacred. This stage was characterized by openness and receptivity whereby one became aware of what was transpiring at the present moment. As a result, there should be a radical transformation in the way one lived and experienced self-boundaries and sense of self. Adam’s final stage of experiencing the sacred was appropriation and integration. Following the direct experiences of the sacred, one engaged in significant dialogues; appropriating and integrating what transpired. This
conceptualization, too, contained and assumed strong ideological views not shared universally.

Benefiel (2005) also proposed stages of spiritual transformation - awakening, transition, recovery, dark night, and dawn - relevant first to the individual, and later to organizations. These descriptors of the stages of transformation are neither self-explanatory nor rooted in the spirituality literature.

The previous examples of conceptualizations of spirituality are based on an assumption of shared ideologies; that what they were describing was (or should be) the experience of all others. It is important to carefully analyze whether ostensibly descriptive terms are being subtly used to prescribe. These researchers apparently possessed an unstated intuition that true spirituality must somehow be universal, but from that intuition made the unfounded assumption that everyone, therefore, must share the experience they articulated. Believing they were being descriptive, they were, in fact, prescribing a set of conditions necessary for spirituality (in their conceptualizations). There is a second way this motivation to cast a conceptualization as universal plays out. Kriger and Seng (2005), evidently subject to the logical result of their own ideology, argued that the five major world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) have the same ultimate goal; a non-dualistic state. Kriger and Seng (2005) claimed this non-dual orientation lies at the heart of each of the religions of the world, not just the five they chose to utilize in the construction of their conceptual work (Kriger & Seng, 2005). A detailed review of the tenets of these five major religions is beyond the scope of this work; however, non-dualism is not a core, universal tenet binding them together. Two of these religions, Judaism and Christianity, are explicitly both theistic and dualistic. Non-dualism is, in its essence, a form of pantheism and incompatible with these (Chafer, 1947). While a conceptualization may wish to be inclusive, it may not legitimately do so by glossing over, re-defining, or ignoring tenets held by another religion.

Gotsis and Kortezi (2008) articulated what amounts to a 2-fold taxonomy for categorizing workplace spirituality. They used the terms exploratory/consequential and contextual/acontextual. We have included these pairings of words in Table 1. The explanations they offered of the limitations of exploratory conceptualizations apply equally to all such conceptualizations we call ideological (the left side or left poles of Table 1). We believe this term to be much clearer than exploratory.

Inherent flaws exist when spirituality is conceived and constructed within the framework of a specific tradition or understanding (i.e. ideologically). First, one must understand, and maybe even endorse the specific (ideological) framework in order to add to the construct. Second, when conceived and constructed ideologically, the concept (of spirituality) ceases to be an all-encompassing (universal) reality; an ‘abstract construct’; a quality of the term essential to the true understanding of spirituality (Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003). When spirituality is conceived and constructed in this way, the concept is deprived of its universalistic nature (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008). This also is our criticism.
All the above conceptualizations of spirituality were grounded (perhaps knowingly, perhaps not) in ideological tenets or understandings not universally shared. Each of these conceptualizations thus depended on an understanding of spirituality derived from Spirit. We’ve used a capital S to designate this. Others do not differentiate a fully developed Self (often they use a capital S) from being spiritual (Maslow, 1954). We would agree that fully actualizing one’s self is essentially a spiritual journey, to which others can be encouraged. However, the same cautions must be applied when describing the journey (in universal terms) as opposed to prescribing specific means to that end (which are not universal). A prescriptive definition and understanding (conceptualization) of Spirit is required logically to expound a religion, but such prescription is also what logically causes exclusion rather than inclusion in developing an understanding of universal spirituality (we use a small “s”) suitable for the workplace.

Lest one believe that all ideological understandings of spirituality are bad, let us clearly state that this is not the case. The ideological conceptualizations above serve to illustrate the myriad of ways in which spirituality can be understood and experienced. This breadth and diversity adds richness to the understanding of spirituality when the sum is allowed to transcend the particulars, when the holders of these particulars acknowledge, even embrace, that theirs may not be the only way spirituality may be understood or experienced. This leads us to examine the non-ideological conceptualizations of spirituality.

**Non-ideological conceptualizations of spirituality**

Gotsis and Kortezi’s (2008) second taxonomical category they called consequential. These paradigms, they suggested, are understandings of workplace spirituality which are proposed or understood solely or mostly due to their utility or pragmatic or economic value to the organization. While the benefits of workplace spirituality to the organization have certainly been researched (Benefiel, 2003; Fry, 2003), and continue to be researched (Kolodinsky, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2008), and we agree that the possibility for organizational exploitation exists (as with any knowledge or tool), we believe the likelihood of this exploitation to be small, and perhaps overstated. Organizations could use this new found ‘fad’ of humanistic spirituality unethically, thus Gotsis and Kortezi’s (2008) critique is a legitimate potential limitation of conceptualizations we have labeled non-ideological. However, when examining the literature contemporary scholars suggest models or theories which clearly attempt to bridge the gap between the personal level of spirituality and any organizational benefit. Sheep (2006) recommended a “both-and” understanding. Kolodinsky, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz’ (2008) third distinct conceptual understanding of workplace spirituality was “interactive;” a coming together of the corporate and the personal. In this same way we propose to clarify and extend (by illustration) a model of non-ideological workplace spirituality which also brings these together.

In contrast to ideological conceptualizations of spirituality, several researchers have developed conceptualizations of spirituality using an inductive process for their development; working from specific values and behaviors that approach universal
acceptance. The terms used to describe these conceptualizations create a second mental composite derived from the opposite poles of the same several salient characteristics (see Table 1). We collectively label this composite as non-ideological. Non-ideological conceptualizations of spirituality need not be consequential (i.e. exploitive, or mainly for the benefit of the organization) as some researchers fear (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2008). They do not benefit only the organization.

There can be no single exhaustive list created of characteristics, behaviors, virtues, or values to measure spirituality. Nonetheless several authors have put forth lists of candidates for inclusion. As would be expected, each selects different concepts and uses different words to describe them. Some of the concepts and words are obvious and clear, others less so. Fry (2005) identified a set of core values associated with a spiritual employee: honesty, forgiveness, hope, gratitude, humility, compassion, and integrity. Bragues (2006) identified a set of virtues relevant to the workplace: courage, self-control, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, sociability, and justice. Wisdom and prudence were added as intellectual virtues (Bragues, 2006). Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2004) offered a set of values: benevolence, generativity, humanism, integrity, justice, mutuality, receptivity, respect, responsibility, and trust.

Smith (1992) argued that all religions have the shared common values of humility, charity, veracity, and vision. This work built upon others in developing lists of attributes and practices widely associated with spirituality found to have a global appeal (Den Hartog, 1999; Reave, 2005). Such lists of values are not dissimilar to emotional and interpersonal competencies identified in the Emotional Intelligence literature (Riggio, 2007).

Hicks (2002) said that spirituality is assumed to be a dimension of the human being that is shared by all persons. Since the entire construct of workplace spirituality is built upon the assumption that this assumption is true, then an inductive approach using ostensibly universal virtues, values, characteristics, and behaviors associated with human spirituality should inform the development of conceptual models which cannot be judged as narrowly ideological. And yet, religion can still be a central place from which these characteristics are drawn.

Whittington et al (2005) describe Legacy Leadership, a model of spiritual leadership which, although derived from an explicitly Christian tradition, relies only on specific, universal characteristics of (human) spirituality. Therefore, their framework can be applied both in other religions as well as in a secular environment. If a universally accepted framework of spirituality suitable for the workplace is to be developed, it will need to emphasize such universally accepted humanistic characteristics.

**Spirituality in the Workplace**

The growing spiritual movement in the workplace is about finding opportunities to express the many aspects of one’s being in the workplace, not merely being able to (or limited to) the performance of physical or intellectual tasks (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000).
Researchers have asserted that spirituality manifests itself in organizational contexts as well as in the traditional individual manifestations (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). These authors proposed a multi-dimensional approach to investigating spirituality in organizations. They identified a model composed of three levels; the individual level, the work-unit level, and the organizational level. The individual level is composed of three primary components. The first component, inner life, referred to capturing an individual’s hopefulness, awareness of personal values, and concern for spirituality. From this, the individual created meaning at work, which represented items that provided a sense of what is important, energizing, and joyful about work. The third component of the individual level was the condition for community, which represented the fellowship or interpersonal dimension required for spiritual development.

Ashmos and Duchon’s (2000) next level was the work unit level, which consisted of two primary components: work unit as community and positive work unit values. Work unit as community represented the extent to which the work unit was encouraging and caring. Positive work unit values referred to the extent to which the individual identified with the work unit’s values, goals, and mission.

The third level Ashmos and Douchon (2000) identified is the organizational level. One of its primary components was organizational values; the individual’s perception of the values of the organization. For spiritual growth to occur these values had to be congruent with the employee’s own personal values.

Three recurring themes emerged when attempting to understand spirituality successfully expressed in the workplace (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). The first theme was that, in contrast to conventional religion, spirituality need not be formal, structured, or organized. Second, the spiritual dimension can be experienced by every person regardless of religious or ideological perspective. Finally, spirituality (small s) was broadly inclusive; embracing everyone. Hicks (2003), in championing Respectful Pluralism listed three limiting norms; non-degradation, non-coercion, and non-establishment. These norms, we concur, are essential to the practical (successful) incorporation of spirituality into the workplace.

Mitroff and Denton (1999) claimed that moving an organization to a more spiritual plane involved a process. A value-based organization serves as the starting point for its own evolution into becoming a spiritual organization. The value-based organization must be founded on critical and universal principles such as knowledge, love, respect, integrity, and trust. Such values are not the domain of any particular ideology or religion and provide a minimally controversial place from which to begin incorporating spiritually-oriented expressions (employee initiated) of these values into the organization. Thus, spiritual organizations are those which first hold, and then incorporate, a strong sense of humanistic, global morality and ethics. It is a mix of both being and becoming.

**Developing an Integrative Framework of Spirituality**
Throughout an earlier review of spirituality literature three general themes emerged regarding the conceptualization of spirituality: personal fulfillment, interconnectedness, and the relationship to a higher power (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998). Fry (2005), in reviewing articles in a special issue of The Leadership Quarterly, also identified a theme comprised of three universal spiritual needs; that what is required for workplace spirituality is an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by calling or transcendence of self within a context of a community, based on the values of altruistic love. Douchon and Plowman (2005), in the same issue, articulated a definition which avoided the explicitly Spiritual (large “S”) while maintaining a substantive spiritual (small s). They defined workplace spirituality as “a workplace that recognizes that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community”. We have attempted to model this definition (see Figure 1).

Their definition comes close to being a useable definition of workplace spirituality, yet we believe can benefit from additional modeling. The Douchon and Plowman (2005) model (our Figure 1) has been expanded to show the multi-faceted nature of the inner self and its relationship to many domains (see Figure 2).
**Figure 1.** The Douchon and Plowman (2005) model of the relationship of self to other domains.

This expanded model illustrates that the inner self does not nourish, and is not nourished by a single dimension or domain, but rather by many and varied dimensions or domains.

*Proposition 1. The inner life is nourished by, and nourishes, many domains. These domains can either reinforce or contradict one another.*

A spiritual workplace can now be defined as “a workplace that recognizes that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by many domains, including meaningful work --all of which takes place in the context of community”. This community (restricted to the work context) includes co-workers, subordinates, and bosses. These individuals may not share ideologies, life-styles, or beliefs, but in a spiritual organization each recognizes and embraces diversity itself, and values each employee as a person, knowing that the personal, spiritual elements of these individuals not only make them who they are, but are also foundational to the dynamic of workplace spirituality. This is the understanding of spirituality that is not only acceptable in the workplace, but which we believe adds richness and satisfaction to it.
Proposition 2. The community of the work environment is one of many.

Figure 2. Expanded version of the the Douchon and Plowman (2005) model showing the multi-faceted relationships between inner self and other domains

The double-ended arrows in our model illustrate that who we are (Self, represented by the inner life circle) is the infinitely complex composite of the interrelationships between almost all our past and present experiences, in all domains. These double-ended arrows also illustrate that the size and shape of our domains varies from individual to individual.
Proposition 3. The number, size, and degree of influence of the various domains vary with each employee.

One person may have a large influence from extended family, ethnic heritage, or their most intimate personal relationship. Another may be influenced most by their personal beliefs; derived and/or re-enforced by their church, denomination, or other Spiritual community. Still another may be highly dedicated to the organization. Their work, and the organization itself, may nearly or even completely supplant, for them, any need of another community. And what cannot adequately be illustrated is that the number and variety of slices of the model are almost infinite. Hobbies and interests, goals and aspirations, personal histories and experiences can all be interactive slices of the holistic person. Thus even the expanded model is an exceedingly simplistic illustration of the complexity of human beings. Experiences, skills, relationships, tragedies, successes, age, gender, interests, vocation, habits, vices, addictions all nourish and are nourished by our inner life.

The expanded model’s value is to show that humans can never be adequately evaluated single-dimensionally. When we come to work we bring to the table all of this, all of who we are, whether able to articulate it or not due to the environmental (external) constraints placed upon us. For example, that quadrant which includes the ultimate source of meaning, or purpose, or truth to each of the individuals in the community need not be exhaustively articulated or expressed in a workplace, but similarly (in terms of spirit [small s]) cannot be ignored or ruthlessly suppressed.

Proposition 4. Certain full expressions of who the employee is may never be fully welcome even in a spiritual organization.

It is quite likely that persons can, and do, derive the same virtues from very different sources. The virtue (for example truthfulness or kindness), therefore remains just as acceptable in the relatively secular environment of the workplace as in a religious setting. The source, however, for example a specific religion or denomination, may not be as welcome. Certain tenets or prescriptive requirements of religions, such as proselytizing or ‘witnessing’ on company time and company property, may even be forbidden.

Nonetheless, the people (employees) must be treated holistically. It is the recognition of this multi-faceted aspect of the human spirit (regardless of its sources) which is the underpinning of a spiritual workplace.
Discussion

Spirituality has been variously conceptualized as a transcendent-phenomenological experience, as an evolving developmental process, and as a composite of nearly universal human virtues, values, characteristics, and behaviors. Clearly, there are competing understandings of spirituality. This paper sheds light on these different conceptualizations of spirituality, applies a simple two-part taxonomy, and has critiqued those we feel are most appropriate for consideration (‘fit’) within the constraints of the Western, secular workplace. We have essentially advocated for a non-ideological expression of spirituality in the workplace, that is, a spirituality built from universal values, virtues, and behaviors. We have also argued that a single-domain model (i.e. the workplace itself) is inadequate to support a complete conceptualization of workplace spirituality, adding other domains into an illustrative model.

Limitations-Future Directions

What we have not done in this paper is explicitly critique whether it is possible to posit or claim an element as ‘spiritual’ which somehow exceeds its own definition. That is, is it possible for a person to claim something is ‘spiritual’ (for him/her own self), with which virtually no other person would agree? Or is the definition of spiritual unconstrained, open to no boundaries? Does this create a possible third type of construct? The first being theistic or religious (big S Spirituality), the second being universal or humanistic (small s spirituality), and a third being an intensely or uniquely held personal spirituality? On what basis do we, or can we, limit our non-ideological concept of spirituality? And how would such a conceptualization be received by an organization/workplace? A second question raised by this paper is exactly how an organization goes about promoting a universal, (ostensibly) humanistically-based spirituality when we have suggested that the same results (the virtues and values and behaviors, desired) can be derived in multiple ways and from a variety of sources. How can an employee be told that their value or virtue or behavior is acceptable, but its source (for them) must be ‘left outside’? How can the organizational boundaries be ‘permeable’ to the virtue but not to the source (if deemed ‘religious’)?

Relative Contributions of Review

This review of spirituality provides an introduction to understanding the exceedingly broad and diverse conceptual frameworks that have been used to examine the construct, essentially rejects those that are too sectarian or ideological, and endorses an inductive, values-based universalistic approach to defining workplace spirituality. This multi-variable construct was then developed into an integrated model and several propositions were identified to guide future research.

Conclusion

This paper proposes an expanded conceptualization of spirituality in the workplace based on the inductive identification of humanistic (small s) virtues, values, and
characteristics. It proposes a simple taxonomic table to evaluate the characteristics of a conceptualization. The resulting framework offers a balanced and acceptable representation of the interplay between organizational spirituality, personal relationships, and faith. It is hoped that others may improve upon this conceptualization and also that practical, real-life applications may ensue.

References


