An Examination of Subtypes of Spirituality and their Associations with Family Cohesion in U.S. College Students

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand subtypes of spiritual beliefs and their associations with family cohesion. Using a sample of 150 undergraduates, we examined written narratives in which participants described what spirituality means to them and what role it plays in their lives. Responses were classified into one of the following categories: *neither experiential/personalized* (e/p) *nor dogmatic/ritualistic* (d/r) (14%); *primarily d/r* (17.3%); *primarily e/p* (57.3%); e/p + d/r (11.3%). While representing the smallest group, participants whose beliefs were classified into the integrated e/p + d/r category reported the highest level of family cohesion. This supports study hypotheses and is important because greater family cohesion has been found to be associated with mental health benefits. Findings suggest that spiritual interventions aimed at bolstering both d/r (e.g., church attendance) along with more e/p elements of spirituality (e.g., turning to spirituality for guiding principles) may have the greatest benefit for family functioning, and perhaps indirectly, for mental health
Keywords: Spirituality; Family cohesion; Religiosity; Mental health.

Examinación de los Tipos de Espiritualidad y sus Asociaciones con la Cohesión Familiar en Estudiantes Universitarios en los Estados Unidos

Compendio

El objetivo de este estudio fue entender los diferentes tipos de creencias espirituales y sus asociaciones con la cohesión familiar. Utilizando una muestra de 150 estudiantes universitarios, examinamos narrativas escritas en los cuales los sujetos describieron el significado personal de la espiritualidad y el papel que juega en sus vidas. Las respuestas fueron clasificadas usando las siguientes categorías: ni experimentales/personales (e/p) o dogmáticas/ritualistas (d/r) (14%); principalmente d/r (17.3%); principalmente e/p (57.3%); e/p y d/r (11.3%). Aunque compusieron el grupo más pequeño, los participantes cuyas creencias fueron clasificadas en la categoría e/p y d/r reportaron los niveles más altos de cohesión familiar. Dichos resultados apoyan nuestras hipótesis y son importantes porque estudios previos han demostrado que la cohesión familiar es asociada con beneficios en la salud mental. Los resultados sugieren que intervenciones que pretenden aumentar d/r (por ejemplo, asistencia a la iglesia) tanto como e/p (por ejemplo, usando los principios espirituales como fuentes de consejo) posiblemente tengan los mejores beneficios para las interacciones familiares y, quizás indirectamente, para la salud mental. *Palabras-clave*: Espiritualidad; Cohesión familiar; Religiosidad; Salud mental.

Spirituality/religion is an important domain of study, as it appears to play a major role in the lives of many individuals residing in the U.S. For example, approximately 95% report believing in God or a higher power, 60% avow that religion is very important in their lives, and up to 75% proclaim they pray daily (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999); these rates are similar among adolescents (Gallup & Bezilla, 1992).

Henceforth in this paper we will use the term *spirituality* as an umbrella term that incorporates dogmatic/ritualistic aspects such as going to church, praying, and reading religious scripture with more experiential and personalized aspects of spirituality such as using it as a behavioral guide or meaning making force to understand and cope with life's adversities. We combine terms because, until recently, religion and spirituality were generally assessed with global indices and most of the studies that are reviewed in this paper did not formally distinguish between these constructs. Thus, it would be difficult to tease apart one from the

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other when interpreting the findings (Weisman, Rosales, Kymalainen, & Armesto, 2005). We recognize that the term *spirituality* likely implies different things to different people depending on one's personal interpretation, worldview, and culture (McSherry & Cash, 2004). Consequently, one of several aims of this study is to better understand qualitatively what this term signifies to different individuals. We also aim to better understand subtypes of spiritual beliefs and how these beliefs relate to individuals' perceptions of family cohesion.

Overview of the Literature

To begin, the overwhelming majority of research links greater spirituality with better mental and physical health in both youth and adults (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000; Seybold & Hill, 2001). A comprehensive review of studies conducted between 1998 and 2004 that examined the associations between spirituality and mental health in a group of adolescents up to age 20 concluded that higher levels of spirituality were associated with better mental health in 90% of empirical studies (Wong, Rew, & Slaikeu, 2006).

Some research indicates that certain aspects of spirituality are particularly associated with mental health benefits. For example, people who report experiential and/or personalized (e/p) manifestations of spirituality, such as having a close connection to God, are especially likely to reap health benefits (Haber, Jacob, & Spangler, 2007). Other research shows that more dogmatic and ritualistic (d/r) aspects of spirituality are also associated with mental health benefits. For example, regular church attendance in children has been found to be associated with less aggression (Nooney & Woodrum, 2004). In line with this research, Hodges (2002) describes an emotionally healthy individual as one who has "an active spiritual life, who finds meaning and purpose in life and who operates from an intrinsic value system that guides their life's work and decisions" and as "part of larger community, which involves worshiping, praying . . ." In other words, Hodges views emotionally healthy individuals as those who integrate existential and dogmatic aspects of spirituality.

For many, exposure to spirituality often comes through the family. Spiritual practices within the family often shape one's later traditions and spiritual beliefs and values (Swenson, 2008) and may influence comportment and mental health through behavioral norms that encourage healthful living and activities and more positive family functioning (Haber et al., 2007). For example, in a study on Christianity and forgiveness with married couples, Reinke (2006) found that both moral attitudes towards relationships and ritualistic behaviors positively related to forgiveness and increased marital satisfaction.

Additionally, a fair amount of research suggests that family functioning and family cohesion are associated with better mental health (e.g., Rivera et al., 2008; Weisman et al., 2005). Pearce and Axinn (1998) theorized that spiritual families may be more cohesive than non-spiritual families, since most religious disciplines encourage strong family ties. Pearce and Axinn found a positive relationship between the self-reported importance of religion in families' lives and both mother and adult children's report of relationship quality. The National Study of Youth and Religion (Smith & Kim, 2003) put forth a report on family religious involvement and the quality of family relationships for early adolescents in the U.S. and concluded that family and parental religious involvement are associated with positive family relationships. For instance, youth in the U.S. from religiously active families are more likely to report that their parents are helpful and supportive than are youth from families that are not religious. However, research examining specific elements of spirituality and family cohesion in young adults are scarce (Holden, 2001; Reinke, 2006).

Spirituality is, therefore, an important domain of study, as it appears to play a major role in the lives of many young individuals and families residing in the U.S. and in many respects can be a very positive force. Nonetheless, we still know relatively little about underlying dimensions of spirituality, people's subjective understanding of these concepts, and the association between spirituality and family cohesion (Holden, 2001; Reinke, 2006). An examination of subtypes of spirituality is important since research indicates that outcomes are not determined by *whether* one is spiritual but *how* one is spiritual (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). An examination of the subtypes of spirituality and how these relate to family functioning might help elucidate the mechanisms by which spiritual beliefs and practices relate to mental and physical health (Haber et al., 2007).

Using a multi-ethnic sample of undergraduates, the aim of the current study was to better understand associations among types of spirituality and family cohesion. Narratives in which participants were asked to describe what spirituality means to them and what role it plays in their lives were used to classify participants into the following four categories of spirituality: (a) neither experiential/personalized (e/p) nor dogmatic/ritualistic (d/r), (b) primarily d/r, (c) primarily e/p, (d) e/p and d/r. The content of the written narratives was used to rate the importance of spirituality in each person's life on a 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important) scale. We also evaluated participants' own self reports of their spirituality with the widely used and validated Moral Religious Emphasis subscale of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1981).

Based on research reviewed above (e.g., Hodges, 2002), we hypothesized that individuals who integrated both e/p (e.g., believing that a higher power will provide one with the strength to cope with adversity) and d/r (e.g., reading the bible; going to church) forms of spirituality into their daily lives would report having more cohesive families than would individuals who subscribed primarily to e/p or d/r forms of spirituality or who did not view themselves as spiritual at all. Given prior research linking greater spirituality to better quality of family relationships (Smith & Kim, 2003), however, we also hypothesized that being spiritual in any form (endorsing e/p or d/r views) would be associated with greater family cohesion than would endorsing neither e/p nor d/r views of spirituality. With respect to the salience or importance of spirituality in participants' lives, again based on prior research (Pearce & Axinn, 1998), we hypothesized that both examiners' ratings of salience of spirituality based on participants' written narratives, and participants own self report of their spirituality based on the FES, would be positively associated with greater perceptions of unity and cohesion in their families. On an exploratory basis, we also tested whether subscribing to either a primarily e/p or primarily d/r form of spirituality would have greater benefits to family functioning over the other. Finally, to better understand the role of spirituality in people's lives, we conducted qualitative analyses of the content of participants' responses to the following questions: (a) *What does the word spirituality mean to you?*, (b) *What role does it play in your life?*, and (c) *How does spirituality impact your relationships?*

Method

Design and Procedure

Participants arrived in small groups to the testing site. Research assistants provided a brief overview of the measures to be completed by participants, verbally explained the consent form to all participants, and answered any questions. Participants were then invited to read and sign the consent form if they agreed to participate. All research procedures for the current study were conducted under the oversight of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions before commencing the evaluation and a researcher was also available throughout the process for that purpose.

Participants

One-hundred-fifty (99 female and 51 male) undergraduate students attending a private, medium-sized research institution participated in this study. Participants had a mean age of 19.81 (SD = 3.45), which ranged from 17 to 41 years. The ethnic breakdown of the participants was 41% Caucasian, 37% Hispanic, 11% African American, and 11% other.

Materials

Background Information. A demographic sheet was included to assess participants' age, gender, and ethnicity.

Spiritual Subtypes. Written narratives, in which participants were asked to describe what "spirituality" means to them, what role it plays in their lives, and how it impacts their relationships, were used to classify participants' spiritual beliefs and behaviors into one of the following four categories: (a) neither e/p nor d/r, (b) primarily d/r, (c) primarily e/p, (d) e/p + d/r. Two raters were trained by the first author to identify categories of spirituality. Each rater coded half of the transcripts. After training was completed the raters and the trainer each co-rated 7 transcripts. Kappa's between the trainer and one of the coders was 1.00 and was .79 with the other coder. Cohen's kappa between the two raters was .79.

Evaluators' Ratings of Spirituality. Two coders were also trained by the first author to make a quantitative rating of the strength of participants' spirituality on a scale of 1 = Not at all Important to 5 = Very Important. Ratings were based on participants' written narratives. To evaluate reliability, the raters and the trainer each co-rated 7 transcripts. Intraclass correlation coefficients between the trainer and each of the two coders was .92 and .97. The intraclass coefficient between the two coders was .96. To avoid rater bias between spiritual category and spirituality strength, separate coders were used to rate each. In other words, for each transcript one coder rated category and a different coder rated strength.

Self Report of Religiosity/Spirituality and Family Cohesion. The Family Environment Scale (FES) was used as a self report measure of participants' spiritual values and their perceptions of their family's cohesiveness. This scale, developed by Moos and Moos (1981), is a 90 item true-false measure which contains nine subscales.

The Cohesion subscale of the FES was used to assess participants' perceptions of family unity. This subscale consists of 9 true-false items designed to measure the degree of commitment, help, and support family members provide for one another. Scores are coded such that higher scores for the sum of the nine items indicate greater family cohesion. Internal reliability, using Cronbach's alpha, was found to be .77, nearly identical to the estimate of .78 (Moos & Moos, 1981) found by the scales' developers on this subscale.

The Moral-Religious Emphasis subscale was used to measure participants' self report of their spiritual family values. This subscale also consists of 9 true-false items aimed at tapping ethical and religious values and behaviors in the family. Scores are coded such that higher

scores for the sum of the nine items indicate greater religious/spiritual emphasis in the family. A reliability estimate of .72 also indicated adequate reliability for this subscale in our sample. This estimate is only slightly lower than the estimate of .78 reported by the scale's developers (Moos & Moos, 1981) for this subscale.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses indicated that males (M =16.08; SD=1.97) and females (M=15.81; SD=2.30) showed no differences on family cohesion t (147) = .69, $p > .05$ rated from the FES. There were also no differences between males (M=14.27; SD=2.47) and females (M =14.34; SD=2.15) on spirituality rated from the FES t (143) = -.20, $p > .05$. Chi square analyses were conducted to evaluate whether there were gender differences in spiritual category (i.e., primarily d/r, primarily e/p). No differences were found χ^2=2.42, $p > .05$.

Next, we ran analyses to assess for differences between whites and ethnic minorities (Hispanic, African American, or Other) in our primary variables of interest. Minorities were combined because there were too few participants in the African-American and other categories to examine them separately. No differences were found between whites (M = 15.93; SD = 2.20) and minorities (M =15.89; SD= 2.20) on family cohesion, t (147) = .13, $p > .05$. However, minorities (M =14.66;

SD =2.08) were found to be more religious than whites (M = 13.81; SD = 2.41) using self report data from the FES t (143) = -2.26, $p < .05$. There was also a trend in the same direction when comparing minorities (M=3.74; SD = 1.14) and whites (M = 3.37, SD=1.44) on evaluators' ratings of participants' spirituality, based on written narratives t (148) = -.1.74, p =.08. A Chi square analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there were minority-status differences in spiritual category (i.e., primarily dogmatic/behavioral, primarily existential). Minority status and spiritual category were not significantly related, $\chi^2 = 6.20$, $p > .05$.

Main Analyses

Spirituality Subtypes. Frequencies were totaled based on the classification of participants' written narratives in which they were asked the following:

> Please describe below, in approximately one paragraph, how important you believe 'spirituality' is to you. Please include in your description what the word spirituality means to you, what role it plays in your life, and how you feel your spirituality impacts (if at all) your relationships with those that are closest to you.

Results were as follows: 57.3% were classified as primarily existential, 17.3% were classified as primarily dogmatic, 14% were classified as neither existential nor dogmatic, and 11.3% were classified as both existential and dogmatic. See Table 1 for an example of a response from each category.

Table 1
Examples of Each Spiritual Category

Spiritual Category

Primarily E/P. Spirituality to me refers to belief in a higher power, but not necessarily ascribing to a specific religion. I think spirituality and religion are not necessarily connected. I believe in a power higher than myself, and that this power is all loving, of all people, excluding no one. This power gives me strength when I need it, reminds me to lighten up, and seems to be this ever-present omniscient narrator, not in charge of my life, but just telling the story of it. I believe things work out the way they are supposed to, with all relationships. Spirituality is important to me in romantic relationships. I cannot be involved with someone who is a religious fanatic, always preaching to me about why my beliefs on spirituality are wrong. Within my family, arguments often stem from disagreements about our Jewish heritage and religion, and ways I think the religion is wrong.

Primarily D/R. Spirituality has always been very important in my family, although we are not fanatics of religion, we pray together every single night and go to mass regularly. We celebrate every religious holiday and other important things. I am currently attending a Catholic University so it is very important to me in my everyday life. Spirituality is the belief you have about your religion (any religion).

Neither E/P nor D/R. Spirituality has never really played a big role in my life. I define spirituality to be a dependence and reliance on God and faith. I have always relied more on myself and do not really value spirituality. I have instead focused my actions on morality. Since I have no strong spirituality I feel it has not affected my relationships.

Existential and D/R. Spirituality is very important to me. I am Catholic and I attend church every Sunday. This one hour that I have to reflect on my life and its relationships truly does help me assess the importance of my relationships. I get the chance to pray to God and ask him for help with my relationships. I bring any problems that I am having and also thank him for my successful relationships. Spirituality helps me maintain good, solid relationships with my family and friends.

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One-way analyses of variance were conducted to evaluate the relationship between spiritual category and family cohesion. The independent variable, spiritual category, included four levels: neither e/p nor d/r, primarily d/r, primarily e/p, and both e/p and d/r. As hypothesized, results of a one-way ANOVA revealed between-group differences for spiritual category on family cohesion, F (3, 145) = 2.87, p <.05. The strength of the relationship between spiritual category and family cohesion, as assessed by partial η^2, was moderate, with the spiritual category factor accounting for 5.6% of the variance in family cohesion.

Follow-up paired and linear contrasts were conducted to evaluate our specific a priori hypotheses. See Table 2 for means, standard deviations, and t-values. The means and Figure 1 strongly show that, as hypothesized, the group categorized as both *e/p and d/r* had the highest level of family cohesion. Participants classified in the e/p + d/r group had significantly higher scores on family cohesion than those in each of the other categories ($p <$ .05 for all). A further compound analysis was conducted to compare participants who did not endorse being spiritual at all versus those who did endorse being spiritual in either a d/r or an e/p fashion (this was done by collapsing the d/r and e/p groups into one spiritual category). Contrary to expectations, no differences were found. In other words, being classified as e/p only or d/r only was not associated with benefits to family functioning, even beyond participants classified as not spiritual at all. On a post hoc basis, a Scheffe test was conducted to examine whether there were differences in family cohesion between participants categorized in the primarily d/r category versus the primarily e/p category. No significant differences were found (p>.05).

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviations and t Values Comparing FES Scores in Each Category to those in the Existential + Dogmatic Group

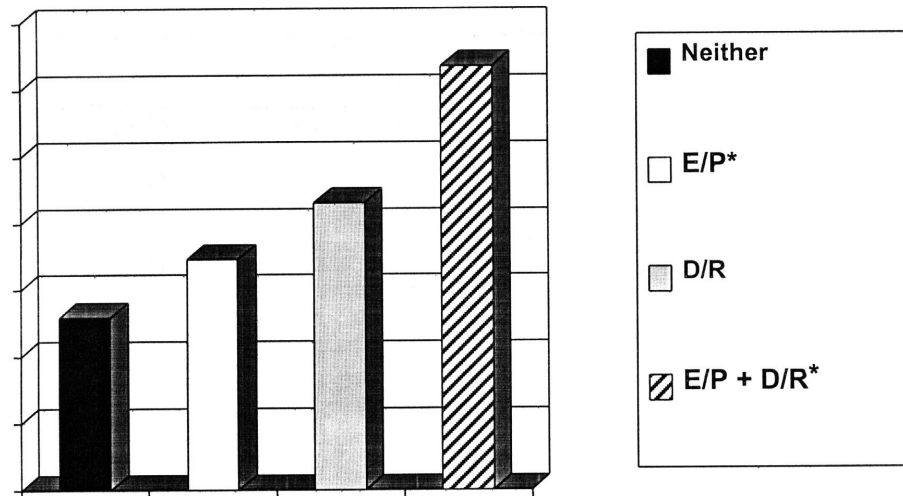| Spiritual Category	M	SD	
E/P + D/R	17.18	0.95	
*Primarily D/R	16.15	2.05	t(41)=-2.20
**Primarily E/P	15.73	2.10	t(100)=-4.46
*Not spiritual	15.29	3.00	t(36)=-2.72

Note. *p<.05; **p<.01.

Figure 1. Association between endorsed spiritual category and perceived family unity

Observers' ratings of the strength of participants' spiritual and religious beliefs derived from written narratives were also examined. In this analysis, minority status was controlled because it related to FES religiosity scores and there was also a trend for it to relate to independent examiners' ratings of participants' spirituality, as extracted from the narratives. The average rating on the five point objective scale was 3.59 (SD = 1.28). Results of a partial correlation indicated that the salience of spirituality, based on an objective rating by another person extracted from a written narrative, was significantly associated with one's own endorsement of spirituality rated from the FES, r_p=.53, p <.001.

Consistent with prior research and study hypotheses, partial correlations also indicated that participants who endorsed being more spiritual on the FES also endorsed having more cohesive families, r_p= .34; p <.001. This pattern was consistent with the correlation between observers' independent ratings of participants' spirituality and family cohesion, r_p=.28; p <.001.

Content Analyses

To gain a better understanding of the content of participants' spiritual values, we conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of participants' responses regarding the following questions: (a) *What does the word spirituality mean to you?* (b) *What role does it play in your life?* and (c) *How does spirituality impact your relationships?* For each question, four graduate student coders worked together to make qualitative ratings of the three primary topics that were most frequently expressed by participants. The first author of this paper and the four coders came to a consensus regarding how best to categorize or label the content of the three most frequently expressed themes in response to each question. For each category, two examples are given from participants' narratives to illustrate the theme. Each example is independent of the others. In other words, all quotations below are from different participants.

Question 1. What does spirituality mean to you? For this question, the three most commonly identified themes were: (a) *Reference to a higher power/supreme being.* Thirty-nine participants made reference to theme A in their responses. Two examples of these responses include the following statements: "Spirituality means believing in some force or higher power, how this force/power controls one's life, and living according to the rules that this force/power sets for us as human beings;" and "Spirituality means believing in a higher power, a higher being, and having faith in a higher purpose;" (b) *An internal focus on peace, selflessness, well-being.* Sixteen participants made reference to theme B in their response. Examples of this theme are "Spirituality means being at peace with myself and with my surroundings" and "To me, spirituality is being in touch with yourself and all the forces that surround you; and (c) *A view that spirituality and religion are independent concepts.* Seven participants made reference to theme C in their response. For example one participant said "Spirituality to me has nothing to do with religion." And "To me, spirituality is not about religion."

Question 2. What role does spirituality play in your life? The three most commonly identified themes were: (a) *Guides behavior.* Twenty-two participants made reference to this theme in their responses. Two examples include, "My whole decision-making process generally follows my religious beliefs" and "I try to live my life according to the Bible and my Catholic faith… I always try to do the Godly submissive things." (b) *Strength and hope for the future.* Sixteen participants made reference to theme B in their response. Examples of these include "Spirituality gives me the strength and hope I need" and "Being somewhat spiritual has always given me the hope that no matter how bad things get or how overwhelmed." I feel, some sort of higher power just might exist, therefore giving me confidence and easing my worries a bit. (c) *Ability to function.* Seven participants made reference to theme C in their response. For example, one participant said "Without some sort of faith I feel that it would be hard to make it through some of life's troubling situations." Another participant said

> I believe the word spirituality is very important because to me that is what helps you pass and overcome all your problems. It helps you look at things and situations in other ways. You are always able to look at things in a positive way. To me this is very important in order to overcome all the obstacles and barricades that are put in front of us each and every day.

Question 3. How does spirituality impact your relationships? For this question, the three most commonly identified themes were: (a) *Commitment to God and to others.* Seventeen participants made reference to this theme in their responses. For example, one participant said, "I was raised in a very Christian household, spirituality means having a very close relationship with God and having him as my closet friend and being able to put all of my faith in him." Another participant said "I think that couples who are highly spiritual probably work harder at keeping their relationships together because they don't believe in divorce." (b) *Motivation to empathize and be in tune with others.* Thirteen participants made reference to theme B in their response.

> Spirituality, to me as a Christian, means the level of Christ-likeness you demonstrate in the way you relate to other people. For example, whenever I disagree with someone else's point of view, I generally try and see where they are coming from. I state my own opinion in a way that doesn't belittle the other person.

Another participant said

> I know that this spirituality with God helps me get along with others. My spirituality has taught me to be more patient and to love others even if they have hurt me the most. Therefore it helps me to forgive and live a happier life.

(c) *A relationship separator or screener.* Eight participants made reference to theme C in their response. "My father is not spiritual at all, hardly. He goes to church with us rarely, only when my mother forces him. I feel he is almost an outsider for this, among other reasons." Another relative said "I think that if my morals (both religious and nonreligious) diverge completely from that of the person's with whom I'm making a relationship, then my beliefs will take first place over the relationship."

Discussion

In this study we found that most participants (57.3%) viewed spirituality primarily in *experiential/personalized* (*e/p*) terms. That is participants were most likely

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to describe it in terms of meaning making, connection to others, or belief in a higher power but without strong connection to any specific rituals or dogma. This classification was over three times more common than the next most frequent classification, which was the primarily *dogmatic/ritualistic* (*d/r*) category (17.3% of participants endorsed beliefs falling in this category). Relatively few participants were classified as not at all spiritual (14%). This number may be viewed as consistent with a growing body of research, which indicates that the large majority of the United States population identify as being religious or spiritual in some fashion (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999; Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001).

We found that only 11.3% of participants' responses fell in the final category, *both e/p and d/r*. While in the minority, participants in this group endorsed significantly greater cohesion and unity in their families than did participants in any other category. Interestingly, having primarily d/r or e/p beliefs alone, without integrating the two, did not appear to have any benefits to family functioning. In other words, participants who endorsed only d/r or only e/p views of spirituality did not even have greater perceived family cohesion than participants who were classified as not spiritual at all. This was true even when we combined the e/p and d/r categories. Thus, it is unlikely to be a function of sample size (as we did find differences between the not at all spiritual and the e/p + d/r groups, which had a considerably smaller sample size).

Why does integrating e/p and d/r aspects into one's perceptions of spirituality have family benefits? There are many reasons why this may be the case. First, people who view spirituality in primarily d/r terms may be prone to engage in religious activities with their family members (Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Pearce & Thorton, 2007). Shared spiritual activities such as praying together, going to church, or celebrating religious holidays in the company of others may be pleasurable and open the door for a strong sense of connection. However, if these activities are not also coupled with some higher level processing, such as talking to one another about the greater meaning of things, or sharing mutual principles such as selflessness, they may have little impact on how cohesive one feels towards their family members or others with whom they practice these rituals. In other words, it may be critical to integrate these higher level meaning making processes with dogmatic and ritualistic behaviors and beliefs to have an impact on feelings of unity towards one another.

Similarly, those who view spirituality in primarily e/p terms likely share these beliefs with their relatives, as relatives have a great impact on ideologies and behaviors (e.g., Flor & Knapp, 2001; Pearce & Thornton, 2007). However, if e/p beliefs and values are not expressed or acted out through specific shared rituals and activities, they may be less likely to be viewed as an integral part of the family and less likely to result in greater perceived cohesion and intimacy. Thus, in the case of families, spiritual views that contain both specific values and specific behaviors may be most likely to impact members' sense of closeness and unity with one another.

Consistent with prior research and with the views of Pearce and Axinn (1998), in this study, being more spiritual was found to be associated with greater family cohesion based on both a self report measure (the FES) and based on evaluators' ratings extracted from the written narratives. Our findings also appear to extend earlier results by suggesting that a particular kind of spirituality, one that integrates d/r elements and e/p ones, may have an especially positive association with family functioning.

Not surprisingly, minorities in this study reported being more spiritual than whites using the FES, and a similar trend was found based on evaluators' views of participants' spirituality as derived from their narratives. The finding that minorities are more spiritual than whites is not new (e.g., Morano & King, 2005). However, interestingly, greater spirituality did not translate into greater levels of family cohesion for minorities, despite the fact that spirituality was found to be associated with more family cohesion. It would be interesting to examine in future research, what impact greater spiritual values may have in the families of minority clients. For example, it will be important to further examine whether greater endorsement of spirituality for minorities translates into any of the various physical and/or mental health benefits of spirituality noted by previous researchers (e.g., Haber et al., 2007; Larson, Swyers, & McCullough, 1997).

While the results of the content analyses are largely self-explanatory, it is very interesting to note some of the patterns that emerged. First in response to the question: *What does spirituality mean to you?,* we found that many participants (*n*=31, 20.60% of the sample) actually used some variant of the word religion or religiosity in their response For example, one participant said "Spirituality, to me is a religious word that refers to peace between a person and God." Another participant said "I believe that spirituality means incorporating my religion into my life on a daily basis." Furthermore, the most popular reply included reference to a higher power or a supreme being (26% of participants explicitly made this reference). In some ways, this may be viewed as support for Hill et al. (2000) view that the concepts of religion and spirituality are largely intertwined. On the other hand, 7 participants (4.67% of the sample), in response to this question, expressed a clear view that spirituality and religion are indeed distinct concepts

(these individuals were not counted in the tally above regarding those who used the term religion/religiosity in their response). Thus, clearly there is some variability in perceptions of this concept and this difference mirrors a distinction offered by some researchers that religiosity and spirituality are overlapping but distinct constructs (Zinnbauer et al., 2001).

With respect to the second question *What role does spirituality play in your life?,* it is quite noteworthy that all of the three most popular categories of responses (*Guides behavior, strength/ hope for the future, ability to function*) indicated that participants clearly viewed spirituality as primarily an adaptive, helpful, and positive force in their lives. Similarly, with respect to the third question *How does spirituality impact your relationships?,* the two most popular categories (*Commitment to God and to others,* and *Motivation to empathize and be in tune with others*) both clearly indicated that the majority of participants viewed spirituality as having a beneficial impact on their relationships. However, it is important to note that the third most frequent response to this question was categorized as *A relationship separator or screener.* Around five percent of participants did appear to view spirituality as divisive to at least some of their relationships.

Taken together these findings suggest that people's (or at least college students) perceptions of spirituality are generally positive. They view it as a guiding force, a source of hope and a relationship enhancer. This perception is generally consistent with empirical data from this study and others that show that greater spirituality and religion are often associated with better mental and physical health (e.g., Haber et al., 2007; Larson et al., 1997) and better relationships and family functioning (e.g., Reinke, 2006).

On the other hand, spirituality is a complicated construct and, even in this study there was not unanimous support for this view. Some participants clearly saw it as having detrimental aspects (at least to their relationships). It should not be overlooked that spirituality has certainly been used in maladaptive manners. For example, some research has linked being more spiritual to greater authoritarianism, rigidity, dogmatism, suggestibility, and dependence (Gartner, 1996). In summary then, it may be more productive in psychosocial research to examine how one is spiritual rather than whether one is spiritual.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations including its restriction to college students. College students are in a unique phase of life and developmental era and their beliefs and values may be different from those in other age ranges and socioeconomic classes. In future research,

it would be useful to attempt to replicate the findings using a greater range of populations.

In this study we hypothesized that the benefits of integrating both d/r and e/p beliefs into one's view of spirituality has family benefits, because we assume that participants actually engage in these rituals and discuss their spiritual and existential views with relatives. However we did not directly assess actual family behaviors or conversations about spirituality in this study. While research does show a strong link between family ideologies and subsequent behaviors that correspond to these attitudes (Pearce & Thornton, 2007), it would be useful in future research to clarify whether perceptions of spirituality alone account for the differences in perceived family cohesion, or if it is shared behaviors and beliefs themselves that are necessary to reap these family benefits.

In future research it will also be useful to explore how narrative responses might vary if the term religiosity were substituted for spirituality in each of the questions that were posed in this study. In describing our constructs, in this paper we subsumed "religiosity" under the umbrella term of "spirituality." However, our results suggest that to some people at least, these terms are viewed as highly distinct. Future research is needed to clarify how perceptions of these terms differ and how each relates to mental and physical health. Furthermore, it will be important to examine how different dimensions of spirituality and religiosity relate to mental health and other aspects of functioning.

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