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The Relationship Between Spiritual Well Being and College Adjustment for Freshmen at a Southeastern University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the possible relationship between spiritual well being and college adjustment in first-year college students. The Spiritual Well Being Scale and the College Adjustment Scales were administered. Relational analysis was used to investigate 91 college freshmen enrolled in a freshman seminar course at Charleston Southern University, Charleston, South Carolina. This relational analysis included both psychological and developmental aspects of college adjustment in nine specific areas of college adjustment: anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, family relationships, academic problems, and career problems. A statistically significant relationship was found between spiritual well being and all nine of the scales of the College Adjustment Scales. A moderate correlation was found between spiritual well being and anxiety, depression, self-esteem, interpersonal problems, academic problems, and career problems in college freshmen. A low correlation was found between spiritual well being and suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and family problems in college freshmen. Also, a significant difference was found between religious well being and existential well being scores.

Introduction

Each August, thousands of newly admitted college freshmen across the nation must make the transition from being dependent high school students to becoming partially or fully independent college students. This transition requires a period of adjustment. The process can be relatively smooth and problem free for many. However, for others, the transition and subsequent adjustment to college life can be traumatic and fraught with problems (Archer & Cooper, 1998).

Researchers acknowledge that relationships exist between the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of each individual's life. For example, psychologists and other researchers know that physiological functions can affect cognitive processes and vice versa (Davis & Palladino, 2000). However, less is known about the relationships between more specific interactions between an individual's physical, mental, and spiritual self. The literature contains substantial information about individual spirituality. It contains a moderate amount of information about college adjustment. Much less studied and written about, however, is the specific relationship between spiritual well being and college adjustment.

Background

While college presents many students with opportunities for personal growth, some students find the demands of college adjustment exceed their coping resources (Leong & Bonz, 1997). Instead of a positive experience, college becomes a source of distress for these students. Many of these students will need help from counselors and psychologists with their adjustment problems (Davis & Humphrey, 2001). Entering college for the first time is a very stressful experience. Many of these students are leaving home for the first time in their lives. They are thrust into a new living environment, often within cramped residence halls.

Students from varying backgrounds, cultures, and regions of the country are expected to peacefully coexist. And finally, most students are faced with a more academically challenging curriculum than they have been accustomed to in secondary school. With all these changes in mind, it comes as no surprise to student development professionals that their freshman population will provide a large percentage of their counseling center clientele.

College counseling centers across the nation are facing increased demand for services. Although the needs for counseling and mental health services are great, the resources to provide them are limited (Archer & Cooper, 1998). Therefore, it is in the best interests of student services administrators in higher education to become proactive in identifying sources for helping students cope with the increased challenges with which they are faced.

While related to the amount of stress present in student's lives, college adjustment is also related to the ways in which individual students cope with their stress (Leong & Bonz, 1997). Therefore, spiritual well being as a coping mechanism is worthy of increased attention and research. Central to the problem background, however, is to understand the ways in which college students and college campuses have changed over the years.

The number of entering college freshmen with serious psychological problems has risen dramatically in the past twenty years. Also, because of better psychopharmacological interventions, many students are able to successfully attend college and complete their degree programs today who simply would not have been able to do so only a few short years ago (Davis & Humphrey, 2000).

By learning more about the different ways in which college students cope with the stress of adjusting to college social and academic life, student development professionals will be better able to assist their clientele. Spiritual well being as a coping mechanism is fertile ground for serious inquiry.

In secular public and private universities, student services administrators report a renewed interest in religion and spirituality. The move toward religion on college campuses is broad-based, however, and includes everything from Judaism to New Age to Buddhism. It represents a growing interest in religion among Americans in general (Spaid, 1996).

College adjustment

Successful adjustment to college during the freshman year is an area of increasing concern for institutions of higher education (McGrath & Braunstein, 1997). Studies show that more students leave their college or university without completing a degree program than will stay and graduate. According to the American College Testing (ACT) data files, institutional attrition across the nation has remained stable since 1983. This

and other reports indicate that, of the nearly 2.8 million students who enter higher education for the first time, over 1.6 million leave their first college or university prior to graduation. Of these, approximately 1.2 million will leave higher education without ever earning their degree. Overall, only 44 percent of 4-year college and university students complete their degree program (Tinto, 1993).

Since 75 percent of students who drop out of college do so within the first two years and the greatest proportion of these drop out after the first year (Tinto, 1993), it is very important to understand the complex issues that influence successful college adjustment during the first year. Most studies on retention and college adjustment attempt to identify the individual factors that predict successful adjustment. These include the student's intentions for going to college, the student's commitment to meet individual goals and the willingness to comply with the academic and social demands of the institution, and interactional factors. These factors include social supports and the extent to which these social supports are perceived by the individual to meet his or her needs and interests. Another interactional factor is the degree to which the student is socially integrated into the college community. One study reports that the more a student was socially integrated in the activities of the campus environment, the more likely the student was to persist in college (Boulter, 2002).

Recent surveys report a number of trends that suggest freshmen are experiencing increasingly more stress. Between 1987 and 1997, the percent of freshmen who reported being overwhelmed increased steadily from 16.4 percent to 29.4 percent, and the percent who sought personal counseling after entering college increased from 34.7 percent to 41.1 percent (Austin, Parrott, Korn, & Sax, 1997).

Research Design and Instrumentation

Selection of Subjects

The participants in this study consisted of 91 college freshmen. The rationale behind the use of the Freshman Seminar (GNED 101) course for selection of the sample was that (1) all new freshmen take this course, and (2) this precludes possible bias in the sample due to course selection. This course provides an introduction to the meaning and significance of higher education, to the challenges inherent in university life, and to the values characterized by the University. This course provides an ideal sample from which to select participants for this study because topics covered in the course include making the transition to campus life, academic/classroom skills, goal setting, and lifestyle decisions (Charleston Southern University, Undergraduate Catalog, 2003-2004).

The analysis was conducted through the use of a correlational design to help determine whether there was a significant relationship between spiritual well being and college adjustment for college freshmen. The correlational analysis used the Pearson Product Moment Correlation test to determine whether a significant relationship exists between the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) overall score and the scores of the nine (9) scales of the College Adjustment Scales (CAS). These scales include: Anxiety (AN), Depression (DP), Suicidal Ideation (SI), Substance Abuse (SA), Self-esteem Problems (SE), Interpersonal Problems (IP), Family Problems (FP), Academic Problems (AP), and Career Problems (CP). The t-test for Paired Samples was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between Religious Well Being (RWB) scores and Existential Well Being (EWB) scores within the Spiritual Well Being Scales (SWBS) for college freshmen.

Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS)

The Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) was developed as a general measure of the subjective quality of life. It serves as a global psychological measure of one's perception of spiritual well being. The SWBS is understood to be holistic. The scale is intended to measure people's overall spiritual well being as it is perceived by them in both a religious well being (RWB) sense and an existential well being (EWB) sense.

By design, the construction of the Spiritual Well Being Scale includes both a religious and a social psychological dimension. The religious "vertical" dimension (RWB) focuses on how one perceives the well being of his or her spiritual life as it is expressed in relation to God. The social psychological, "horizontal" dimension (EWB) concerns how well the person is adjusted to self, community, and surroundings. This component involves the existential notions of life purpose, life satisfaction, and positive or negative life experiences (Hill & Hood, 1999).

The Spiritual Well Being Scale was developed by Ellison (1983) and consists of 20 questions. The Spiritual Well Being Scale is a self-assessment instrument, where participants rate their level of Spiritual Well Being on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The higher the score, the more purpose in life and life satisfaction one experiences. These scores are summed in order to yield three scale scores; one score for Religious Well Being (RWB), one score for Existential Well Being (EWB), and one score for total Spiritual Well Being (SWB).

The scale is easily understood, requires 10-15 minutes to complete, and has clear scoring guidelines. It is nonsectarian and can be used in a variety of religious, health, and research contexts (Hill & Hood, 1999). Since its first publication in 1982, over 300 requests to use the SWBS in research have been received by the authors (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1991).

College Adjustment Scales (CAS)

The College Adjustment Scales (CAS) is an inventory for use by professionals who provide counseling services to college students. The CAS was developed to provide a rapid method of screening college counseling clients for common developmental and psychological problems (Grayson & Cauley, 1989).

Based on an analysis of presenting problems in college counseling centers, the CAS scales provide measures of psychological distress, relationship conflict, low self-esteem, and academic and career choice difficulties. The nine CAS scales are: Anxiety (AN), Depression (DP), Suicidal Ideation (SI), Substance Abuse (SA), Self-esteem Problems (SE), Interpersonal Problems (IP), Family Problems (FP), Academic Problems (AP), and Career Problems (CP).

The CAS is a 108-item questionnaire and can be administered in approximately 15-20 minutes. The answer sheet is designed to be hand-scored by the examiner and a profile form is provided on the back side of the answer sheet. The profile form allows raw score conversion to *T* and percentile scores. A graph of the profile may be drawn to visually portray the student's scores. The CAS was standardized and validated for use with college and university students. Available research and normative data indicate that the CAS is unbiased with respect to gender and ethnic group membership. The CAS can be administered in either individual or group testing situations (Anton & Reed, 1991).

Findings

Research Question 1

The Null Hypothesis for research question one is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Anxiety scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-AN) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a moderate correlation of $-.511$ between spiritual well being and anxiety in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.511$), the Null was rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and anxiety in college freshmen.

Research Question 2

The Null Hypothesis for research question two is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Depression scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-DP) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a moderate correlation of $-.494$ between spiritual well being and depression in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.494$), the Null is rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and depression in college freshmen.

Research Question 3

The Null Hypothesis for research question three is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Suicidal Ideation scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-SI) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a low correlation of $-.250$ between spiritual well being and suicidal ideation in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.250$), the Null is rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and suicidal ideation in college freshmen.

Research Question 4

The Null Hypothesis for research question four is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Substance Abuse scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-SA) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a low correlation of $-.315$ between spiritual well being and substance abuse in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.315$), the Null is rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and substance abuse in college freshmen.

Research Question 5

The Null Hypothesis for research question five is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the

Self-esteem scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-SE) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a moderate correlation of $-.529$ between spiritual well being and self-esteem in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.529$), the Null was rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and self-esteem in college freshmen.

Research Question 6

The Null Hypothesis for research question six is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Interpersonal Problems scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-IP) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a moderate correlation of $-.534$ between spiritual well being and interpersonal problems in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.534$), the Null is rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and interpersonal problems in college freshmen.

Research Question 7

The Null Hypothesis for research question seven is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Family Problems scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-FP) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a low correlation of $-.349$ between spiritual well being and family problems in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.349$), the Null was rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and family problems in college freshmen.

Research Question 8

The Null Hypothesis for research question eight is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Academic Problems scores of the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-AP) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a moderate correlation of $-.412$ between spiritual well being and academic problems in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r ($-.412$), the Null is rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and academic problems in college freshmen.

Research Question 9

The Null Hypothesis for research question nine is: There is no statistically significant relationship between the overall score on the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS) and the Career Problems scores on the College Adjustment Scales (CAS-CP) for college freshmen. The relational analysis used was the Pearson Product Moment test, which determined the observed value of Pearson r to be a moderate correlation of $-.494$

between spiritual well being and career problems in college freshmen. Since the r critical value (.205) is less than the observed value of r (-.494), the Null was rejected. There is a statistically significant relationship between spiritual well being and career problems in college freshmen.

Research Question 10

The Null Hypothesis for research question ten is: There is no statistically significant difference between the Religious Well Being (RWB) score and Existential Well Being (EWB) score of the Spiritual Well Being Scales (SWBS) for college freshmen. The t -test for Paired Samples was used to compare these scores and determine whether or not there is a statistically significant difference. The obtained value of t at the .05 level of significance for the Religious Well Being (EWB) scores and the Existential Well Being (EWB) scores was 3.326. Due to the fact that the observed value of t (3.326) is greater than the critical value of t (2.000), there is a statistically significant difference between the RWB and EWB scores of the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS). Since the t critical value (2.000) is less than the observed values of t (3.326), the Null is rejected.

Conclusions

Of the nine correlational studies, six were found to have a moderate correlation (.40 - .60) and three had a low correlation (.20 - .40), *although all were statistically significant*. All relationships were found to be negative relationships. In other words, the higher the students scored in spiritual well being, the lower the students scored in the nine areas, indicating fewer adjustment problems. This is precisely what was hypothesized.

The most significant relationship in this study was the relationship between spiritual well being and interpersonal problems (-.534), followed closely by self-esteem (-.529) and anxiety (-.511). This supports the consensus of the literature that those who place a high value on their spiritual relationship are also likely to experience less anxiety, feel better about themselves, and try harder to get along with others. It is important to remember that simply demonstrating a relationship between two variables does not prove causation. However, it also does not negate it. In other words, just because a student scores high on the Spiritual Well Being Scale does not automatically mean the student will be psychologically and developmentally well. Nor does this imply that all students who score low on the Spiritual Well Being Scale will suffer from psychological and developmental problems.

The least significant relationship in this study was the relationship between spiritual well being and suicidal ideation (-.250), followed by substance abuse (-.315). However, this statistic requires a special comment. Since most students reported no thoughts of suicidal ideation, the range of scores on this scale for the 91 subjects was particularly narrow. Ravid (2000) addresses this issue and states that “the correlation obtained may also underestimate the real relationship between variables if one or both variables have a restricted range, i.e. low variance.” (p. 155). This appears to be the case with suicidal ideation and substance abuse, although it should be noted that both the relationships were still statistically significant. No participant scored sufficiently high on the suicidal ideation scale to cause concern or require follow-up intervention.

A final area of inquiry was to look within the Spiritual Well Being Scale itself to determine whether or not there were any significant differences between the student's

scores in terms of Religious Well Being and Existential Well Being. A t -test for paired samples indicated that a significant difference was present between the two sets of scores. The mean score for Religious Well Being (52.07) was almost three points higher than the mean score for Existential Well Being (49.64). This indicates to this writer that students felt a little better about their relationship with God and their sense of satisfaction with their spiritual life, than they did about their level of life satisfaction in general.

Summary

This paper began by describing how important spirituality is in the lives of many people. It also described the difficulties faced by thousands of college students each year in making a smooth and successful transition from high school to college. Many dramatic changes take place during this transition that increase the possibility of adjustment problems. Therefore, student services personnel and college counselors are interested in finding ways to help students cope with these changes. A student's level of spirituality was seen as one possible coping mechanism.

Spiritual well being as a coping mechanism is worthy of increased attention and research. Our country is currently at war. Stress and anxiety levels are high and students are concerned about their futures. They are also concerned about loved ones serving overseas. It is apparent to this writer that increased interest in the spiritual realm is at an all-time high. Whether it lasts remains to be seen. However, at this juncture in history, college students are calling upon all their internal resources to help them cope and to continue on with their studies with minimal disruption.

By learning more about the different ways in which college students deal with the stress of adjustment to college social and academic life, college counselors and other student development administrators will be better prepared to assist their students. If spirituality is particularly important to a student, then counselors need to be aware that this is a tool they can use to reach and better assist their client.

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