



Evaluating Spiritual Change

Introduction

In the field of spiritual change, monitoring and evaluation is a notoriously difficult challenge. The multiplicity of relevant factors combines with human individuality and contextual forces to create a tangled web of influence and causality. However, as with any initiative that promotes human growth and development, outcomes may be identified and rigorously tracked, yielding unique insights into the effectiveness of a given program. In recent years, significant attention has gone to addressing this challenge, and researchers from a number of fields have made headway in developing validated instruments to support this work.

The following study represents current best practices for understanding this unique dimension of the human experience. It suggests multiple entry points that can be combined to form a conceptual framework for effectively evaluating spiritual change.

Executive Summary

The study of human spiritual development is a relatively new addition to the field of the social sciences. Research increasingly indicates, however, that spirituality plays a unique and significant role in human development.

Existing studies of spirituality point to the complexity of understanding this shared human experience. In some senses, human spirituality is as unique as the person who describes it, and defies any attempt to standardize or catalogue. On the other hand, researchers increasingly recognize a handful of key domains that shed light on what we're coming to understand as a profoundly shared human experience. Current investigations focus on a number of discrete elements and their interrelationships, including:

- spirituality: the human experience of transcendence
- religion: participation in the structures and practices of a particular spiritual approach
- morality: the interrelationship between human beliefs and behaviors
- context: the influences of relationships, community, and culture
- human flourishing: the role of spirituality as it serves or hinders human growth and well-being

Spiritual development plays a pivotal role in individual and social change. While no investigation can exhaustively describe all aspects of human spiritual experience, a strategically focused evaluation will yield highly significant insights. A careful exploration of the spiritual dynamics in play will prove highly beneficial to any program that works to promote transformation.

Spirituality

Broadly defined, spirituality encompasses the human experience of transcendence, the means by which we connect to something outside ourselves. This encompasses a wide variety of experiences, including connectedness to God (or other deity), a sense of the transcendent through nature, or an unshakeable sense of purpose or meaning. Spirituality, in this sense, is a profoundly subjective category, and is best understood through personal testimony, which itself may take the form of written or spoken word, or even musical or artistic expression.

Religion

Religion is generally understood as the relatively structured approach to the beliefs and practices of a particular faith tradition. While it often gives language to spiritual experience, religion does not require spirituality to flourish. Religion offers a concrete framework of objective practices, doctrines, and relationships, and as such is easier to observe and understand. We know that someone attends worship on a weekly basis, or faces to the east while they pray. They can articulate for us particular beliefs they hold, and we can compare these to our own.

It should be noted that the terms “spirituality” and “religion” are often used interchangeably, and for good reason. For many people the two are experienced as closely linked, if not identical, and share many overlapping qualities. However, for the purposes of research, separating these two factors allows for a closer evaluation of human experience. Furthermore, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the wide variations of belief and practice between individuals and within different communities.¹ A study by the Fetzer Institute offers the following helpful distinction:

...religiousness has specific behavioral, social, doctrinal, and denominational characteristics because it involves a system of worship and doctrine that is shared within a group. Spirituality is concerned with the transcendent, addressing ultimate questions about life’s meaning, with the assumption that there is more to life than what we see or fully understand. Spirituality can call us beyond self to concern and compassion for others. While religions aim to foster and nourish the spiritual life—and spirituality is often a salient aspect of religious participation—it is possible to adopt the outward forms of religious worship and doctrine without having a strong relationship to the transcendent.²

Morality

Within the realm of spirituality, morality addresses the interrelationship between human beliefs and behaviors. “Morality in the theoretical sense is associated with values and principles that need to be evaluated, understood, and fleshed out before one chooses or engages in a particular course of action.”³ This domain thus helps us understand both the motivation and judgment that lead to a particular action, as well as the action itself. Among the various domains of spirituality, the external aspects of morality perhaps best yield themselves to external observation. Motivations and judgment, of course, remain subject to the realm of self-reporting.

Context

While spirituality in particular is often understood to be highly individual, research has increasingly noted the significant role played by relationships, community, and culture. “No man is an island,” observed John Donne, in a statement particularly apropos of the experience of human spirituality. An expert in the field of child spiritual development writes:

Whereas early approaches to spiritual, religious, or faith development underscore individual change or transformation, the field increasingly recognizes the need to shift from an almost-exclusive focus on individuals to transactions between individuals and the various contexts in which they function, including family, peers, and other social relationships, institutional connections (schools, faith communities) and broader national, cultural, ethnic, economic, political, and social contexts.⁴

Any attempt, therefore, to understand spirituality should take into account the complex web of external influences that give unique shape to the individual experience. While these forces provide an important backdrop, it should also be noted that drawing direct causative conclusions is profoundly difficult and, in most cases, to be avoided entirely.

Flourishing

The concept of flourishing is a uniquely complex one to ascertain, tied as it is to widely varying definitions of “the good.” However, researchers are increasingly exploring the ways in which spirituality contributes to generally accepted improvements in quality of life, and studies are cropping up in fields as disparate as youth development⁵ and public health⁶. Recent studies emphasize that spirituality exerts both positive and negative effects, and explore particular ways in which it impacts the breadth of human lived experience. Most effective research in this arena allows for broad statistical analysis as well as self-reporting, and again focuses more on correlation than on causation.

Development

In most cases, researchers consider each of these criteria from a developmental perspective, watching for growth and change over time. Studies are based on the assumption that spirituality is a “work in progress,” generally paralleling the development of personal maturity. This framework draws on the work of psychologist

James Fowler, and while it has been occasionally challenged, some version of a developmental approach represents current best practice in the field.

Evaluation

Each of these domains suggests a wealth of data regarding human spirituality. Given the vast breadth and depth of human experience, effective evaluation will begin with a clear sense of focus: which domains are relevant to the unique questions being asked? Within a chosen domain, what indicators might help shed light on categories that are often highly subjective or, perhaps, intangible? And which tools will best match the questions at hand?

An evaluation of morality in the workplace, for instance, might make use of focus groups to ascertain contextual influences, observation to identify moral behavior, and interviews to determine the extent of personal flourishing that results. In contrast, an evaluation of classroom prayer and meditation might include observation of the practice to understand the role of leadership in supporting the practice, a written survey of students to define the operative religious framework, and a drawing activity to elicit individual experience.

While the complexity of evaluating human spirituality is indeed vast, the resources to guide such an endeavor are already in place. Pairing current best practices with strategic and creative design, researchers can unearth significant and relevant data to inform ongoing program and practices, and shed greater light on the remarkable forces at work contributing to spiritual change.

Conclusion

Clearly, this unique aspect of human experience encompasses a wide range of factors, and cannot be understood from a single angle. Instead, it must be understood as a complex aspect of personal development, and approached with due humility and intentionality.

Effective research will strategically select relevant domains for exploration, focusing on the aspects of spirituality that best apply to the questions at hand. It will follow “best practices” in pertinent fields, deploying tools that may include personal observation, surveys, or analysis of existing data. Reports will reflect the complexity of the investigation, drawing conclusions with caution and care.

Finally, any program of research will remain open to further learning, understanding that just as individual subjects continue to grow and develop, so must this field. The evaluation of human spirituality is in many ways quite young, and promises a great deal of future learning and maturity. Investigation within this arena offers considerable potential for ongoing understanding of the intricacies and complexities of human individuals and societies.

¹ Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2008). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research.

² Underwood, L. G., & Teresi, J. A. (2002). The daily spiritual experience scale: Development, theoretical description, reliability, exploratory factor analysis, and preliminary construct validity using health-related data. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 24(1), 2.

³Stoll, S. K., & Beller, J. M. (1998). Can character be measured? *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 69(1), 19-24.

⁴ Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2013). Children, religion, and spiritual development: Reframing a research agenda. *The SAGE Handbook of Child Research*, 81.

⁵ Lerner, R. M., von Eye, A., Lerner, J. V., Lewin-Bizan, S., & Bowers, E. P. (2010). Special issue introduction: The meaning and measurement of thriving: A view of the issues. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(7), 707-19.

⁶ Underwood, L. G., & Teresi, J. A. (2002). The daily spiritual experience scale: Development, theoretical description, reliability, exploratory factor analysis, and preliminary construct validity using health-related data. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 24(1), 22-33.