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The Spiritual Practices of College Students

Tamia Hall

Senior Project

Matthew Immergut

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Introduction

Spirituality has a variety of definitions. Some simplify spirituality to one's relationship with or belief in a higher power or associate it to religion. Others chooses to separate it from religiosity and link it to a more general and often secular sense of psycho-emotional well-being. This distinction can be found both in popular discourse as well as within the scholarly literature on spirituality.

Much of the research, however, was based on baby boomers and generation X. Less is known about the current college population, their definitions of spirituality, and the spiritual practices they take part in. This research examined this population asking: how do college students understand spirituality? And what types of spiritual practices do college students take part in and why? Through interviews, the findings showed that most of the students defined their spirituality as separate from religion and much more about their own sense of self and well-being. Rarely did they mention God, the sacred or anything transcendent or beyond themselves. Their loose definition of spirituality allowed them to use a variety of practices for self-betterment, everything from listening to music to yoga. The essence of this paper is that college students use a variety of spiritual practices to better and strengthen their relationships with themselves because of the loose definition that spirituality has.

Below I start with a definition of spirituality found in the literature followed by the research on spirituality within the college population. I then review the methods used in this study, my findings and last a discussion of these findings.

Defining Spirituality

What is spirituality? Is it different than religion? Similar? Different people have different ideas about these questions. But even scholars define spirituality in a variety of ways (Herndon 2003). Some simplify spirituality to a belief and connection with sacred God(s) or associate it with religious traditions (Uyun et al. 2019). Others choose to separate spirituality from God(s) and religion and define it with overlapping common themes of hope, meaning making, and connectedness.

An example where spirituality is associated with God(s) is described by Morgan et al. (2018). They state that spirituality refers to “a relationship between the individual and sacred forces (e.g., ancestry, lineage, deities, spirits, characters in legends or folk tales, guardian angels) that exists both within and outside the confines of religious institutions and orientations” (p 235). Whereas this definition is connected to sacred forces, including gods, their definition includes spirituality within the confines of religion and beyond. An example where spirituality is tied to religion can be found in Uyun et al. (2019) article. Although they did not define spirituality nor religion explicitly, implicitly they linked spirituality to the practice of Islam. Specifically, they studied practices of Islam to test the effects of spirituality on mental and physical health. The scholars imply the teachings of Islam is spiritual because it strengthens a bond with God and other people.

There are several examples where spirituality is defined without a connection to god or sacred forces but more so about the common themes of hope, meaning making, and connectedness. Chae et al. (2004), for example, give a clear definition for spirituality as “an innate capacity and tendency to move towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness and compassion” (p 17). This definition suggests spirituality as something people normally experience or develop in their everyday lives. Another example can be found in the

work of McGee et al (2003). Spirituality is "... the dimension of one's being that is an integrating or unifying factor and that is manifested through unifying interconnectedness purpose and meaning in life innerness or inner resources and transcendence" (McGee). Whereas this definition expresses that spirituality specifically has to do with people connecting with each other and tapping into their inner strengths. One final example can be found by, Kazanjian (2013). He writes, "the terms *spirituality* and *spiritual practice* to refer to those humanistic, religious, and spiritual beliefs and practices through which persons seek to find meaning and purpose as they deepen their understanding of self, other, and world" (99-100). This definition expresses that spirituality is beliefs and behaviors that help individuals create meaning in their lives to understand their interconnects.

With this general overview of various definitions of spirituality, the definition of spirituality that I will be using in this research aligns with those who separate religion and spirituality. I consider spirituality in more humanistic terms as practices, acts and behaviors that align the individual with their deepest beliefs which include an understanding and awareness of self and their interconnection with their natural and social environment.

Spirituality and College Students

The literature on spirituality and college students, generally speaking, focuses on the effects of spiritual practices on well-being. There is also work done on how spiritual practices fosters a sense of managing/control for college students. Last, some research focuses specifically on spirituality and spiritual practices among minority students. This literature review will provide a review and assessment in each of these areas.

The Spiritual Lives of College students

Much of the research shows that college aged students participate in a variety of spiritual practices (Kazanijian 2013). Students are involved in practices such as meditation, mindfulness, gratitude, mantras, listening to music, prayer, and study of scripture. Across this literature it's found that spirituality and spiritual practices helps students in a variety of ways.

For example, Kazanijian (2013) focused on examining spiritual practices on college campuses, how they are practiced, and what it provides to students. He found that there are myriads forms of spiritual practices outside of the traditional practices of meditation, prayer, and yoga. He explained that spirituality gives students a spiritual identity that connects them to a community and set of beliefs and practices that align with the group members. This identity extends to a larger societal context that adds more meaning and purpose in students' lives.

The interest in understanding the concept of spirituality and how students experience it on campus is the first step in acknowledging its presence in this population lives. Kazanijian concluded that there are many ways students practice spirituality. Everything college students do on and off campus provides meaning and purpose in their lives, whether it is internships, joining groups, or email signatures. Additionally, since Kazanijian recognize that spirituality is a part of everything college students do, its importance increase in educational institutions.

Astin et al. (2003), for example, studied the spiritual development in undergraduate freshmen students and try to identify strategies institutions can use to enhance spiritual development (2). The researchers surveyed 112,232 students from 236 different institutions on questions that pertain to perspectives on spirituality and religion. Even though this studied did not focus on identifying practices, their findings show that 61 percent of the students pray at least

weekly, which is a common practice in spirituality. This study concluded that freshman college students are committed to balancing their sense of spirituality and society.

Spiritual Interventions in College Classrooms

Over the years, spirituality has been readily welcomed into classrooms and educational spaces because of its positive influences (Ghosh and Deb 2017; Hall 1999; and McGee 2003 et al). A number of scholars have specifically introduced spiritual interventions into the classroom. The results of these have varied but they all show positive results relative to students' well-being and academic performance.

For example, Ghosh and Deb (2017) had engineering students in India take part in gratitude exercises and then collected feedback. Specifically, they gave students the three blessings exercise and benefit finding exercise. The results found that students engaged in these exercises resulted in emotional well-being, personal growth and other pro-social attitudes and behaviors.

Hall (1999) explores the use of meditation as a tool to improve students' academic performance. Two upper-class psychology students experienced in meditation guided participants in a 10-minute meditation before they started their study sessions, and instructed participants to do the same techniques and processes every time they studied on their own and before any tests. Study sessions with upper classmen were twice a week, 1 hour each throughout the semester. As a result, college students who participated in meditation before studying had higher cumulative and semester GPAs than those who were in the nonmeditation study group.

McGee et al. (2003) measured the levels of spirituality in college students and test the influence of it in their lives. They did so by using a quasi-experimental study with pre- and post-

spirituality assessment test analyses of a treatment group and two comparison groups; enrolled in different courses. The researchers saw the success of spiritual techniques such as journaling, written exercises, and mini-projects within the 16-week report of the study. The study reveals that college students who participate in the intervention had higher levels of spiritual health than those who did not.

Spiritual Interventions related to Stress and Coping in College Students

College students face a variety of stressors – from homework, to classes, navigating work and school, social life and finance, and now, of course the stress of COVID-19. Not surprisingly, there has been research that investigates the role of spirituality in helping students deal with these stressors (Herndon 2003; Roming and Howard 2019; and Yun et al. 2019). Some researchers create intervention specifically designed to see if it's helpful in dealing with stress, while others use surveys to analyze the efficacy of students' coping mechanism. In all cases, they show a high correlation between the spiritual intervention, coping mechanism, and the reduction of stress.

For example, Roming and Howard (2019) evaluate college students' coping strategies such as spirituality, social support, and healthy behaviors that associates with students' quality of life. The researchers analyze online surveys to identify coping mechanisms that measure the quality levels of physical health, social support, and academic coping strategies. As a result, the study found students with high spirituality had low stress, healthier behaviors, and much social support from parents connect to having a high quality of life.

Yun et al. (2019) examined graduate students' perception on their stress, their coping mechanisms, and explore the impact of spirituality of student's perception of stress. The

researchers analyze online surveys that identify students' stress levels and reflect on their coping methods and spirituality. Similar to Roming and Howard (2019) the authors found low-stress levels connected to high levels of spirituality and adaptive coping mechanisms, and students with high-stress levels were associated with dysfunctional coping methods.

Herndon (2003) identifies the roles that spirituality has amongst African American male college students. The author interviews African American male students that attend PWI and focus on spirituality affecting their ability to stay and persist in school, despite the challenges. The study found that African American male students that participate in spiritual or religious practices such as prayer and receive social support from families and others enhance students' persistence through stress from school and other underlying factors.

Spirituality and Minority College Students

Most research suggest that minority college students, such as African Americans, have a stronger relationship with spirituality (Chae et al. 2004). Articles show that African American and Latino/a college students rely and practice spirituality more than other groups because of their identity and is used to cope with hardships and stressors.

For example, Morgan et al. (2018) explored the role of spirituality, religiosity and meaning making amongst Latino/a college students. They analyzed surveys that identify student's demographics, meaning making and thrive. The results found that spirituality and meaning making predict thriving amongst this group.

Chae et al. (2004) examined the relationship of ethnic identity and spiritual development amongst four groups of college students. They collected and analyzed information from

questionnaires they gave to participants. The results showed a positive correlation of ethnic identity to both spirituality with a varied degree of ethnic identification to spirituality.

Spofford et al. (2014) examined the relationship between mindfulness, alcohol use, social disability, daily spiritual experiences and religion amongst African American college students. The researchers analyzed survey packets that were given to participants. The results suggested that African American students who reported being religious on the questionnaire had higher scores of emotional intelligence and verbal expression abilities. They also discovered that religion and spirituality play an important role in African Americans lives in dealing with racism and its harmful psychological effects.

Conclusion

For the most part, literature on spirituality and college students suggest that students practice spirituality in many ways. The most popular practices are prayer and communal activities. The use of spiritual practice in classrooms and for academia helped students balance their lives and improve their academic performance. The effects of spirituality have also played a unique role in creating an identity for students, specifically minorities. Their spiritual practices helped them interconnect themselves with their community and create meaning and purpose in their lives.

Methods

I conducted 9 interviews to examine definitions of spirituality as well as the spiritual practices college students use and for what purposes. I spoke to full time undergraduate students who attend school in the US. My sample group is both male and females from the ages 18 to 24. My sample group are students from all races.

I think studying this diverse population helped my research questions about why students practice spirituality and what does it do for them. The interview allowed a depth not available through surveys because I asked follow-up questions and pick up information from body language. I also wanted to hear student' personal experiences because I hoped to see a variety of practices and definitions of spirituality, I wanted to see and understand how other students connect with themselves and how they use their sense of self to connect and understand their place in relation to the social world.

I interviewed 9 full time undergraduate college students. I chose these people through snowball sampling. I found people who are into spirituality, who are more likely to know and hang around people who have the same interest of spirituality. One participant put my research topic on social media and was contacted by a few people who were interested. Using social media was the best fit with looking for people to interview.

A strength I seen in semi-structured interviews is that I had a clear set of questions, but I also allowed participants to guide the conversation in the direction most meaningful to them. It also allowed for clarification of things I do not understand, and I was able to ask for more details about something that may come up. Another strength I seen in using interviews is that I read people's body language which can gave me more information. A potential limitation I seen in using interviews is that some interviewees went off track and talk about things that was not useful for my study.

I analyzed these interviews by paying close attention to repeated words or phrases interviewees used in hopes of discovering patterns. I also made sure to code words from the outset such as "spirituality," "religion," "practice," "coping," "every day," "meaning/purpose,"

and “hope.” This approach is both inductive – allowing meaning to emerge from the interviews – and deductive – as I used pre-set terms to discover their meaning.

Interview Questions

1. What is your name, age, and the school that you go to?
2. What is your major and what year are you in?
3. How do you define spirituality? What does spirituality mean to you?
4. Is this the same or different to you than religion?
5. Would you consider yourself a spiritual or religious person? Why or why not? (if they say no they don't consider themselves either go to question 10)
6. Do you have any spiritual practices that you do regularly? What are they and how often?
7. Why are these practices important to you?
8. How did you learn about these practices?
9. What else should I know about these spiritual practices and what they mean to you?
10. Do you have something that you do regularly to create a sense of mental and emotional well-being? (if they ask what you mean by well-being, you can say something like, what are things you do to relax or feel good or happy or help you deal with stress or sadness or difficult emotions. If they ask for examples you can talk about walks in nature, meditation, exercise, therapy, etc.).
 - a. I used the term well-being, but is there another reason you do these activities?
What else should I know about these activities and what they mean to you?

Results

Defining Religion and Spirituality

Most participants said they were spiritual and not religious (6 out of 9). For these participants, religion was associated with restrictive rules, God(s) or a higher power, and organized institutions. For example, one interviewee said, “Religion has rules that incorporates God. You have to abide by these rules or there are consequences.” In opposition to religion, these individuals considered themselves spiritual, which was about bettering themselves and having a relationship with themselves.

Here are two examples of definitions of spirituality by participants:

1. I would say more of a personal practice of finding yourself. Finding yourself, through yourself, rather than, looking for external beings.
2. When I think of spirituality, I really just think about the type of person that I am on the inside rather than on the surface... and the type of energy I want to be as a person.

What we see for these participants is that spirituality is about their internal world.

Here are some other examples that reveal this inward focus and self-improvement. Sally said that her spirituality has to do with creating a better relationship with herself and being happy. “One day I asked, why am I putting myself through these situations? It helped me question my life. These practices helped me challenge myself to change my behaviors and perspectives to better myself and my life, to focus on my body, my mental health, and my overall wellness.” Their sense of spirituality centers around the self and their relationship with self. Their spirituality makes them aware of themselves and encourages them to make adjustments in their life. Another example comes from Dj who said, “Spirituality is a personal trait that somebody embarks on, their self, to find whatever solutions they need through looking in themselves or what is around them.” His understanding of spirituality associates with a journey

searching for answers to tend to their needs. Taken together we can see that spirituality was less about the transcendent or sacred other, but more about self and emotional and mental wellbeing.

Even though most people said their spiritual lives were about themselves, there were a few participants that made reference to the sacred or a god. An example of this is from Dj who said, "I'm more on the spiritual side. I do believe there is some type of higher power that is beyond my control. But I don't or can't pinpoint exactly what it is." He acknowledges that there is a sacred force beyond his humanness and can't explain it. Another participant who is familiar with the sacred is Sarah. She said, "The first thing that comes to mind is praying, but it is not necessarily praying to someone, it is praying to my guardian angel who are watching over me." She talked about her connection with the sacred and is sure of their presences in her life. Then there was one other interviewee who associated spirituality with both self and the sacred. Her spirituality was about "being connected, knowing yourself" but also, "... when I think of spirituality I think of my guarding angel, I think of God."

There were two participants who considered both religion and spirituality as important. For instance, Eryn said that spirituality has to do with a relationship with God. "Spirituality is more personal like about the relationship you have with your creator or your higher power." Religious participant's sense of spirituality did not center around themselves, but as a relationship with the a scared. Even though Nasakat describe spirituality as "the quality of a human spirit. Like your soul oppose to physical things is the quality of being concern with your human soul," throughout the interview she talked about her respect for God.

Spiritual Practices

Not surprisingly there were a variety of spiritual practices people undertook. I say not surprisingly because the loose definition of spirituality, one that's connected more to well-being than a sense of a god or the sacred, lends itself to a lot of flexibility.

For example, some defined their spiritual practice as listening to or playing music. Shelton plays different genres of music every day. He said, "What I'll do is I'll kind of just listen to music and close my eyes and that's kind of my form of meditation. That's kind of like my form of like feel the energy that I'm withholding in myself and kind of like release some of that toxic energy." Sarah is a violinist, so she practices often and consider it as one of her spiritual practices. As a result of being a musician she said, "Playing music raises your vibration instantly." She mentions that music immediately changes your mood and the form of your body. For these participants, listening and playing music spiritually uplifts their emotional lives, improving their mood and helping them connect to themselves.

Another form of spiritual practice was the use of tarot cards for clarity and guidance. Sally, for example, talks about toxic interactions, behaviors, mindsets and patterns that she repeatedly experienced. She stated, "Tarot card readings and astrology helped me identify some of these patterns and understand myself more. Like tarot readings gives me insight on situations in the past and the near future." Ariel use the cards to provide clarity to others and for herself. She said, "I also work with tarot cards for any clarification with energies and feeling, or if I want to read for the collected, or for personal people." Unlike the more magical reasons such as predicting the future, for these interviewees Tarot cards are a spiritual-psychological technique to discover themselves.

Yoga and meditation were also regular spiritual practices. Yoga was about connecting to and appreciating their body. Ariel does yoga to help her feel grounded. She said, "I try at least,

sometimes, a few times a week I'll do my meditation, my yoga because without that I don't, I feel very ungrounded, and just in the air." A second example is Sally, she said, "I try to do a morning yoga routine." A third example is Treniece. She said, "My spirituality is I kind of practice my spirituality by doing yoga... Meditating and yoga kind of really gets me into a space. Especially like when your thoughts can be so much. Just calming down and being with yourself and being with your internal dialogue and stuff can really help ground you and stuff." A fourth example is Corina who stated, "I try to do yoga every day and really spend time connecting with myself." Others practiced yoga in the past but not regularly. One example is Dj who said, "I've been on and off with yoga. Mostly off than on." Traditionally yoga – or union - was a practice for awakening or enlightenment. But like so many modern Americans, Yoga is for physical and mental wellness rather than connecting to something transcendent.

Similarly, meditation, which was traditionally used in a context of a religious tradition and for transcendent purposes, was used as a calming practiced and a centering tool for interviewees. Shelton said, "I'll kind of just listen to music and close my eyes and that's kind of my form of meditation." He relies on music to help him to identify and release any toxic energy he withholds. He relies on it more since the pandemic limits time with friends and connecting with new people. Sarah said, "I meditate, and I take time to be quiet and listen to my breath and ask for guidance and talk to my inner self... And I know that these things, like meditation grounds me, it calms. It makes my head clear, so I ask for good thoughts and good ideas...".

Affirmations were also important parts of their spiritual lives. Affirmations provided reassurance, shifted perspectives, blocked out negative thoughts and patterns. For example, Ariel said, "I like to speak intentions into my food and stuff that I drink to help throughout my day, and also, affirmations and mantras." Sally said, "I also say affirmations. I reaffirm myself

whenever I'm thinking negatively or think about my past... When I look in the mirror, I would tell myself affirmations, like you look great today, your body looks good." Another example is of Treniece. She stated, "Affirmations is a big one. Here I have post-it's that have affirmations. Like 'don't over think shit', 'the world is my oyster', 'faith over fear.' Things like that, telling myself like, I am enough, I am important, I am loved stuff like that to just get me through the day. Especially when I am feeling bad."

In a much more general sense, these interviewees saw cultivating certain attitudes as spiritual practice. Gratitude, happiness, and other positive states toward life were intentionally created. For instance, an attitude that Treniece took on was in choosing happiness. She stated, "Happiness isn't a feeling. Happiness isn't like an onset emotion or feeling that you can be every day. So, you literally have to choose it every day when you wake up." Sally cultivated an attitude of being a good person. She said, "So, I try not to talk bad about people, or to speak badly, or to put bad out into the world or to other people. I try not to put other people into pain in any form. I try to be considerate of others as much as I can. I never do anything with the intention to do bad." She makes sure she approaches things in life with the idea of being a good person. She also talks about gratitude. She said, "Showing gratitude and giving thanks to small things like waking up this morning." Another positive attitude was showing appreciation. Sarah also cultivated many attitudes that guided her throughout her day. She stated, "I also practice always seeing the good side of everything because once you look at the bad you create it." Another attitude she has in life is, "... Everything happens for a reason and I always said that as a kid. I didn't understand that until I got older." Another attitude she has is being mindful of what she says. She stated, "Your words are so powerful, like even when you are kidding about words, you can't be because

now we're going into a place where our words are becoming even more powerful and we're really seeing how we are really the creators of everything."

Somewhat related, Corina cultivated a mindset not about positivity per se but where she believes everything has a meaning. She stated, "whenever I start thinking that way, like 'we should all kill ourselves because life doesn't matter', then I try to make sure that even if life doesn't have a purpose or meaning in it of itself, we can all make our own meanings for it. And that's what keeps me going."

For the men, their spirituality was connected to physical activity. Both male participants said working out is some form of spiritual practice. Shelton said, "I guess you can call me a workout junky. I love working out, I feel like that's my second form of release. It definitely helps with, so far as like, anger." They both talk about exercising as a some of coping mechanism. Other physical activities Dj does is play video games and takes pictures, he is a photographer. He also mentioned sex as a de-stressor. Shelton is into fashion and considered picking out clothes as a spiritual practice. He said, "I guess I have an extra spiritual practice which probably sounds really weird, but I'm really interested into fashion. And I could sit and go through four hours' worth of clothes and come up with outfits. And it makes me feel so happy. I guess, I like to say, it gives me time to think."

Spirituality as a Part of Religion

For two of the participants, their spiritual practice was more directly connected to God. Both participants mentioned prayer as practice they do regularly. Eryn identifies as Christian and stated, "I have a morning prayer, I'm supposed to do a night one too, but sometimes that one is shorter. But I have a morning prayer routine that I dedicate that time to me and god. And talk

about everything, talk and pray about people and the world.” She also mentioned that during her prayers she goes through a list of people pray for them. Nasakat identifies herself as Muslim and stated, “We have to pray five times a day.” Another practiced that they both do is read religious text such as the Bible and Quran. Eryn stated, “I don’t know if this is a practice, but I do read the bible occasionally. I don’t do it as much as I would like to because of schoolwork.”

Another practice that Eryn and Nasakat participate in are holidays. Eryn participates in Christian holidays like Easter. Nasakat participate in Islamic holidays. For instance, she stated, “Yeah, right now, currently it is Ramadan, so we are fasting.”

Another spiritual practice is connecting to Guardian angels and higher beings. Sarah, who identifies as both religious and spiritual talked a lot about being connected. For example, she stated, “I feel most comfortable praying to a guardian angel and I truly feel protected. And I say, ‘okay what is going on, show me the next step, show me how I get stronger, show me how I am loved,’ and things really, really do work out.” Similar to Eryn, she has a relationship with these higher beings and connect with them through prayer.

Discussion and Conclusion

Students in this study more often than not defined spirituality as separate from religion and having more to do with the self than the sacred. In some ways, the self could be considered sacred for this population. But this is not surprising considering the history of religion and spirituality in the US. Since the sixties there’s been an increasing move away from what Robert Wuthnow calls a “dwelling” orientation to a “seeking” orientation. Driven by a variety of factors such as the spread of consumer culture, various social movements such as civil rights, feminist and the counter culture, the growth of television, travel, and the failure of government in the

Vietnam war, individuals no longer relied on the church and state for their sense of connection to the sacred and more to themselves. There was, in a sense, a great turn “inward” to the self. This trend can be seen from the 9 interviewees in this study as well. The majority engaged in spiritual practices for bettering and having a relationship with themselves. Like the eclecticism of the 1960s spirituality these students also take part in a variety of practices to get in touch with themselves. Out of the 9 participants, 2 identify listening and playing music as a practice, 2 do tarot readings, 5 did yoga, 5 did meditation, 2 do physical activities, 3 pray, 4 cultivated positive attitudes, and 3 do affirmations. In general, students chose these practices because it put the focus on them and allow them to move accordantly and make the necessary changes for their own well-being. For the most part these students also grew up religious and for the most part rejected their parents’ religion for their own sense of spirituality.

A question these interviews raise, which is also a larger question about spirituality in the United States is: Is this spiritual turn to the self an expression of a culture of narcissism that blinds individuals to their connection with others, with social problems, and anything beyond themselves and in turn reinforces an unjust status quo? In other words, is spirituality the “opiate of the masses”? Or is it an expression of a creative turn in which individuals no longer feel bound by “dead” religious traditions and free to define their own, much more meaningful religious and spiritual lives? The answer is most likely both. I would have had to do more interviews to really explore this question as well as understood more deeply their reasons behind students’ spiritual choices.

This study contributes to the college students' spirituality literature by identifying more of their spiritual practices and what it does for them. College students find many ways to better themselves and have a relationship with themselves. Students use music, exercise, positive

mindsets, and activities to connect with the body, self-reassure, uplift emotional lives, guide themselves as a contribution to becoming the best version of themselves. Given these points, we should explore spirituality more to understand the reasoning behind student's practices. We are in a time where people are individualizing more. So, I believe it is critical to examine what personal practices mean for society in the future.

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