

Definitions of spirituality



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Finding a universal definition of spirituality is challenging and problematic. According to Maher and Hunt (1993): “ *what makes the process of defining spirituality so elusive is the nature of the term itself. It is value laden and seemingly so cultural, religiously and ethnically bound, that any meaningful definition appears to be an exercise in futility* (p. 22)”. Nevertheless, the challenges associated with defining spirituality have not prevented an explosion in the development of (supposedly) spirituality measures. Hill and Hood (1999) carried out an extensive review of spirituality measures and found more than 120 definitions of spirituality. Yet, how these researchers define spirituality is a question that still needs to be answered. Unruh et al. (2002) carried out another review of the literature to look into different meanings of spirituality and religiosity and identified seven themes highlighting how spirituality is defined in health literature including: (1) transcendence or connectedness to a belief or higher being; (2) existential, not of the material world; (3) relationship to God, a spiritual being, a higher power, or a reality greater than oneself; (4) not of the self; (5) a life force of the person, integrating aspect of the person; (6) meaning and purpose in life; and (7) summative, including definitions that included many of the abovementioned themes, as well as values and motivations. Furthermore, McSherry and Cash (2004) also carried out another review to look into the different definitions of spirituality and concluded that it would appear that there is no such thing as a universal definition of spirituality and the theoretical probability of creating one is virtually impossible.

Given that Unruh et al. (2002) and McSherry and Cash (2004) carried out an exhaustive review of the available definitions of spirituality, it is not relevant

to undertake another review of how spirituality is defined in my study. However, for the purpose of this thesis three principles for considering an appropriate definition of spirituality have been adopted. These principles were originally identified by Spilka (1993) and allow for an individual, multidimensional and subjective operationalization of spirituality. Hill et al. (2000) summarized these principles as follows: (1) spirituality as grounded in a belief in a higher being (i. e. God), which considers spirituality to be relevant to the thoughts and practices that underpin theologies either broadly or narrowly defined; (2) spirituality as grounded in self-fulfilment, a conceptualization of spirituality that focuses on human achievement or potential; and (3) spirituality as grounded in the connecting of oneself to a larger ‘ system’, which focuses on one’s relationships with the broader reference group, nature or ecology. Although these are not definitions of spirituality *per se*, each of them offer a contemporary understanding of spirituality. In my thesis, a number of definitions of spirituality were identified and evaluated according to Spilka’s (1993) three principles.

Considering the first principle, Pargament (1999a) describes spirituality as, “ *a search for the sacred* (p. 12)” whereas religion is “ *a search for significance in ways related to the sacred* (p. 12)”. According to Hill et al. (2000) the ‘ sacred’ is an entity (e. g. God or Ultimate Being), object, principle or concept that transcends the self, that is, set apart from the ordinary and is worthy of worship. Operationalizing this definition, Pargament suggests that the self transcends through searching for the sacred. Hence, search for the sacred may not include an intermediate ‘ sacred’ acts such as the pursuit of academic excellence, or the like as worthy of worship, or self-fulfillment and

personal satisfaction (Pargament, 1999b). In this definition, Pargament suggests that spirituality is placed within the broader domain of religion suggesting that it can be influenced by the beliefs, values and principles of a specific religion. However, this is challenging and asserts the difficulty in determining a universal definition of spirituality considering that there is no one universal religion practices throughout the world. The fact that different religious doctrines have adopted diverse and often competing religiosities may therefore render a universal definition of spirituality (Moberg, 2002). Moreover, placing spirituality within the domain of religion restricts research to a narrower and more traditional conceptualization of God (Stifoss-Hansen, 1999).

Taking into consideration that there are various types of religions and that although the majority of UK's population follow a more traditional Anglo-Celtic (e. g. Catholic) religious beliefs and practices (59% of the UK population is reported as being Christian) (UK Census, 2011), there are many who follow other religious beliefs and practices. Pargament's definition of spirituality might not therefore be applicable to peoples following Islam, or peoples of a Dharmic (e. g. Buddhism) origins, for instance (McSherry and Cash, 2004). Hence, the ongoing use of Pargament's definition of spirituality could be argued to be limited.

Considering the second principle, Stifoss-Hansen (1999) provided a different definition of spirituality to that of Pargament. Stifoss-Hansen (1999) proposes that spirituality includes different characteristics that are not in line with Pargament's definition of spirituality. These characteristics include connectedness, authenticity, existentialism, meaning if life, holism and self

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and community, which are considered as aspects of an individual's spirituality indicating that spirituality must be considered a broader, not a narrower, concept to religion. According to Stifoss-Hansen, "*spirituality is people's search for meaning, in relation to the big existential questions* (p. 28)".

Operationalizing this definition, it seems broader than that provided by Pargament and goes beyond the possibly narrow limitations of traditional religion. Yet, there remains a question whether searching for existentialism can result in one living a spiritual life. Pargament (1999a) debates that it may might and also it may not. For Pargament, finding meaning in life, which might be considered as part of existentialism, is not spiritual in nature or complexity. Further consideration of Stifoss-Hansen's definition of existentialist spirituality suggests that one seeks to know the self, free from beliefs, feelings and identities or labels created upon fear of losing one's physical and psychological identities (Ho and Ho, 2007). Seeking the self has a higher degree of complexity and may therefore require a lifetime dedication and self-discipline to master (if mastering the pursuit is, truly, possible) (Hamel et al., 2003).

Hill et al. (2000) offered another definition of spirituality adopting Pargament's definition as a foundation. Hill and his colleagues stated that spirituality is "*thoughts, feelings and behaviours that arise from a search for the sacred* (p. 66)". They even developed a criterion for considering Pargament's definition of spirituality. According to Hill et al., "*the term 'search' refers to the attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform while the term 'sacred' refers to the divine being, divine object, Ultimate*

Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual (p. 66)". Opposing to Pargament's definition, Hill et al. suggest that even though an individual's spirituality can be expressed through religion, it does not essentially need the institution of religion. In this definition, Hill et al. (2000) consider the role of a Being or Purpose that is superior to the individual; namely the Transcendent which might or might not involve God as the Higher Being. One's Higher Being or Purpose may be placed within or beyond the individual, or that the transcendent may be external to the individual, a recognition of something more superior to the individual (Mahoney and Pargament, 2004).

With regards to the third principle identified by Spilka (1993): *spirituality as grounded in the connecting of oneself to a larger 'system'*, Reed (1992) offered a definition of spirituality that focuses more on the individual relationships with self, others, nature and a power greater than the self. According to Reed: "*Specifically spirituality refers to the propensity to make meaning through a sense relatedness to dimensions that transcend the self in such a way that empowers and does not devalue the individual. This relatedness may be experienced intrapersonally (as a connectedness within oneself), interpersonally (in the context of others and the natural environment) and transpersonally (referring to a sense of relatedness to the unseen, God, or power greater than the self and ordinary source* (p. 350)".

In this definition it appears that spirituality is firmly centered on interpersonal relationships and the community; where nature or the environment has a central role in one's experience of spirituality. Contrary to some other definitions of spirituality offered, the one offered by Reed

suggests that one can only know who they are after they have achieved connectedness with others, not independence (Tacey, 2003; Hamel et al., 2003). Considering Reed's definition of spirituality further, by its very nature, it appears to be holistic. It demonstrates that spirituality means an awareness of oneself and our relationships with everything that is not the self (Meehan, 2002). It highlights that individuals seeking spirituality must identify, understand and value the essential socio-spiritual fabric connecting them with all others and nature (Fraser and Grootenboer, 2004). Such a definition of spirituality implicitly takes into account a level of awareness that is post-conventional in orientation.

Reviewing each definition of spirituality presented so far, if spirituality is considered as a universal phenomenon relevant to all persons (Helminiak, 2008), then it is critical that research arrives at a universal definition of spirituality. However, it appears that there are different perspectives to what spirituality 'is' and, thus, in my thesis I adopted the definition that was developed during the European Association for Palliative Care Congress in Vienna with the aim of identifying one definition of spirituality in Europe. According to Nolan et al. (2011):

“ Spirituality is the dynamic dimension of human life that relates to the way persons (individual and community) experience, express and/or seek meaning, purpose and transcendence, and the way they connect to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, to the significant and/or the sacred (p. 88)”.

This definition of spirituality agrees with the three principles highlighted by Spilka (1993) and are in line -in part- with the other definitions; however it is more comprehensive. This definition is also in line with the spiritual well-being framework identified by Fisher (1998) which states that spiritual well-being is not limited to only religious or spiritual behaviours (e. g. belief in God, reading the Bible, church attendance, or praying) and experiences, but extends to the affirmation of life in relationships with oneself (personal), others (communal), nature (environment), and God (transcendental others).

Given that it could be argued that while no one definition of spirituality is possible, Nolan et al.'s (2011) definition of spirituality is used as a working definition of spirituality in my study to find out whether the definitions of spirituality offered by participants fits with this definition and to find out how participants in my study viewed spirituality and how it links to their well-being. The next section now moves on to present the literature review aims and questions.