

The Impact of Religion/Spirituality on Acculturative Stress Among International Students

Selin Philip, Anita A. Neuer Colburn, Lee Underwood, and Hannah Bayne

The authors conducted a qualitative study using phenomenological inquiry to explore the nature and essence of international students' experience of utilizing religion/spirituality to cope with acculturative stress. Twelve students from 2 public universities and diverse religious/spiritual traditions participated. Results suggest that religion/spirituality plays a central role in the heightening of psychological, cognitive, and social functioning and affects students' performance in the academic environment. Implications for student affairs personnel, counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors are provided.

Keywords: international students, religion, spirituality, acculturative stress, coping

Stress permeates the lives of many American college students regardless of their country of origin, ethnicity, or gender (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012). Common stressors include school performance, parental pressure to do well in school, changes in living conditions, career decision-making, financial concerns, academic rigor, and social or peer pressure and interactions (Bland et al., 2012). International students encounter additional and unique stressors, such as difficulties related to cultural adjustment and lack of social connectedness. As “foreigners” in an unknown land, they are expected to make their own personal and social adjustments during their studies in the United States (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Acculturative stress describes the decreased psychological health people might experience when coming into a new culture without enough adaptive resources to support a smooth transition, and it encompasses the behavioral, physical, and psychological health of international students (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015; Atri, Sharma, & Cottrell, 2007). Racial or cultural prejudice, language barriers, diverse philosophies, discrimination, homesickness, perceived hate, fear, and culture shock all contribute to acculturative stress (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Frey & Roy-sircar, 2006; Wu et al., 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013), leading to anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic problems (Dao et al., 2007; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Religion/Spirituality and International Students

International students hold a broad range of religious/spiritual orientations, contributing to the diversity on university campuses (Andrade & Evans, 2009;

Selin Philip, School of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Colorado Christian University; Anita A. Neuer Colburn, School of Counseling, Walden University; Lee Underwood, School of Psychology and Counseling, Regent University; Hannah Bayne, Pastoral Counseling, Loyola University Maryland. Anita A. Neuer Colburn is now at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. Hannah Bayne is now at College of Education, University of Florida. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Selin Philip, School of Behavioral and Social Sciences, College of Adult and Graduate Studies, Colorado Christian University, 8787 Alameda Avenue, Lakewood, CO 80214 (email: sphilip@ccu.edu).

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Johnson & Hayes, 2003). For many, religious/spiritual orientation is an integral part of their identity (Quinn, 2008). Upon arriving in the foreign country, students search for a sense of security and belonging, and religion/spirituality often provides personal empowerment and a structured social system to meet their needs (Chai, Krägeloh, Shepherd, & Billington, 2012; Hsu, Krägeloh, Shepherd, & Billington, 2009). Amid cultural adjustment and acculturative stress, they often turn to their religion/spirituality for solace (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Chai et al., 2012; Gardner, Krägeloh, & Henning, 2014; Hsu et al., 2009). Still, many university-based wellness programs overlook religious/spiritual aspects (Lindholm, 2007; Wood & Herbert, 2005). Understanding the impact of acculturative stress and the possible adaptive coping associated with incorporating religion/spirituality could support improved programming for international students.

We found no published qualitatively designed studies examining the relationship between international students' religion/spirituality and acculturative stress in the United States. However, scholars have argued that qualitative study would lead to a deeper understanding of the broad range of characteristics and dynamics of religious/spiritual coping processes (Tongeren et al., 2016; Xu, 2016). Qualitative inquiry supports understanding of a larger reality by examining it holistically within its contextual setting (Hays & Singh, 2012; Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008) and can, therefore, yield a more thorough understanding of the use of religion/spirituality in managing acculturative stress.

Andrade and Evans (2009) reported that despite the significance and benefit of spirituality/religion, there is little empirical research examining its influence on international students' adjustment to U.S. higher education. Given the importance of religion/spirituality as a positive resource for international students experiencing acculturative stress, as well as the need for improved understanding of this phenomenon among international students, we sought to examine the lived experiences of international students as they utilized their diverse religious/spiritual beliefs and practices to cope with acculturative stressors.

Method

The research question guiding this qualitative study was, "What are the lived experiences of international students who identify as spiritual and/or religious as they manage their unique experiences of stress?" We chose Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach for this study as it facilitates increased understanding of participants' conceptualization and experience of meaning. We sought the full description of the meaning of religion/spirituality in the context of acculturative stress that transcendental phenomenology can provide. Further, phenomenology keeps the focus on participant experiences without imposing researcher conclusions, which can be important when studying populations often absent from dominant cultural narratives (Hays & Singh, 2012). Given that little is known about international student experiences, it seemed important for us to select a method aimed at preserving their voices.

Data Collection Procedure

We used criterion and purposive sampling procedures characteristic of qualitative research to recruit international students from local universities, ensuring students had both experienced acculturative stress and utilized spiritual and/or religious coping strategies (Hays & Singh, 2012). Universities were selected based on the diversity of students and the degree to which we could access international students. We sent invitations to four schools, and two responded affirmatively. We asked student affairs officers of each to share the information (including a screening interview questionnaire and a letter outlining participation information) with their international students and provided opportunities for students to ask questions about the research study through email or by phone before scheduling the 50- to 60-minute interview. The first author emailed the informed consent document, again inviting students to ask any questions. The first author held the interviews in person (on campus, in a classroom) or via Skype. Transcripts were sent back to participants to check for accuracy prior to data analysis.

Participants

We used a screening instrument to select 12 appropriate participants from an initial group of 14 students who indicated an interest in the study. These 12 students were chosen based on their experiences of acculturative stress and religious/spiritual identity. They were international students enrolled for credit at an accredited higher education institution in the United States on a temporary visa and were not classified as immigrants or refugees. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 38 years and had been enrolled between 8 months and 8 years at two U.S. public institutions. There were six male and six female participants; 11 were graduate students, and one was an undergraduate student. Five participants were pursuing master's degrees, and six (two of whom had completed master's degrees in the United States) were in PhD programs. Nine were single; three were married. They represented eight countries: India ($n = 4$), Cameroon ($n = 2$), China ($n = 1$), Thailand ($n = 1$), South Korea ($n = 1$), Ghana ($n = 1$), Ecuador ($n = 1$), and Turkey ($n = 1$). They endorsed six religious/spiritual traditions or worldviews: Hinduism ($n = 3$), Christianity ($n = 5$), Islam ($n = 1$), Buddhism ($n = 1$), New Age spirituality ($n = 1$), and nontheistic spirituality ($n = 1$). Seven identified as both religious and spiritual, and five identified as spiritual but not religious.

Procedure

We first assessed students' experiences of acculturative stress and their identity as religious and/or spiritual to determine eligibility. Demographic questions addressed country of origin, current student status, age, and ethnicity. Next, based on extant literature, we developed 12 open-ended questions to understand the lived experiences of international students better as they utilized

spirituality and religion to ameliorate their acculturative stress. Questions assessed the participants' personal definitions or meaning of spirituality/religiosity and its role in coping with stress, their experiences as spiritual/religious individuals in a new society and of acculturation-related stress and coping, and the type of support they received via university student services. We probed as necessary to understand participants' perspectives fully.

Data Analysis

Our research team consisted of the first author, two coders (advanced doctoral students trained in qualitative research), a peer debriefer (an advanced doctoral student trained in qualitative research), and a research mentor/auditor (second author). At our initial meeting, we discussed and bracketed personal biases and assumptions. The lead author was, at the time, an international student in the United States, conducting her doctoral dissertation at a faith-based institution. The second author was an experienced qualitative researcher and served as auditor throughout the process. She was faculty at the same institution, as was the third author. The fourth author was from a secular institution and had experience conducting qualitative research among college students. All were interested in the impact of religion/spirituality.

Qualitative researchers must maintain a careful balance of subjectivity and objectivity because they are the instruments through which data are analyzed (Hays & Singh, 2012). We utilized peer debriefing, auditing, consensus coding, and member checking to minimize the impact of researcher bias on the analysis of the data. Our goal throughout the process was to represent the voices of our participants accurately. We expected that religion/spirituality would help mitigate acculturative stress, but we were unsure how this would occur, and we were interested in discovering the richness of participants' experiences via their stories.

We analyzed verbatim transcripts to determine the relevant, significant, invariant meanings (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994) that would provide descriptions of religion/spirituality and its impact on acculturative stress. We reviewed the transcripts separately and met to develop a provisional codebook. We coded three transcripts individually and came back together for consensus coding. We repeated this procedure until all the transcripts were coded. The first author consulted with the peer debriefer on a regular basis, and the peer debriefer reviewed the transcripts and codes and provided feedback. We reflected on codes, added new codes, and collapsed overlapping or repetitive codes. Initially, we found 20 primary codes and 56 subcodes then reduced them to 10 primary codes and 45 subcodes via consensus coding procedures. We then recoded all the transcripts according to those codes, further collapsing them into themes and subthemes. The final analysis yielded six themes and 12 subthemes. The second author audited the codebook development and coding processes. We cross-checked each of the final themes with the original transcripts and retained only those themes that reflected data from an interview accurately. Finally, participants were invited to review the themes,

ensure their voices were represented, and offer any additional input. We then constructed a *composite textural-structural description* (Moustakas, 1994) that revealed the essence of the participants' experiences. Individual participant descriptions are available upon request from the first author.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness in qualitative research loosely equates with reliability and validity in quantitative inquiry (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) and encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012; Morse et al., 2002). We addressed credibility and confirmability by member checking, meeting with a peer debriefer between interviews, triangulating the data analysis via a coding team, and having our process reviewed by an auditor. We established transferability and dependability by providing sufficient information about the researchers, the research contexts, the research process, and the findings. We protected privacy by using pseudonyms to report results.

Results

The six overarching themes and 12 subthemes are summarized in Table 1.

Multiple Influences on Acculturation Process and Outcome

Processes and outcomes of acculturation varied and were influenced by both personal and situational factors. Personal factors included self-perceptions of identity (including English language proficiency), loneliness, and homesick-

TABLE 1
**Themes and Subthemes of International Students’
Religious/Spiritual and Acculturation Experiences**

Theme and Subtheme
Multiple influences on acculturation process and outcome
Influenced by personal factors
Influenced by situational factors
Individual nature of religious/spiritual experiences
Religion and spirituality as interchangeable and as separate constructs
Religion/spirituality as a personal experience and as a daily pursuit
Distinct religious/spiritual practices
Impact of religion/spirituality on acculturative stress
Religion/spirituality as a psychological resource
Religion/spirituality as a cognitive resource
Religion/spirituality as a social resource
Utilization of nonreligious/spiritual coping methods
Positive coping mechanisms
Negative coping mechanisms
Barriers and responses to religious/spiritual experiences
Helpful services: Foster a holistic worldview
Existing services
Desired services

ness, which led to intrapersonal conflicts that negatively affected participants' perceptions. For example, Bob (Ghana) shared the stress he felt in the classroom due to his self-perceptions, based on his collectivistic cultural orientation. He stated, "Africans are communal people. We always want to move around with people. Americans are very individualistic and self-based. That can negatively affect you in the classroom." Likewise, Jessica (Turkey) stated that lack of English proficiency tainted her self-concept as an effective communicator, leading to reticence, anxiety, and a desire to abandon her studies. She reflected, "Sometimes I cannot explain everything to them [American students]. I think I cannot be here, and I should go back. Because sometimes it's hard to find correct words to tell them."

Situational factors included previous experiences of intercultural contacts, academic system differences, perceived/actual discrimination, cultural behavior conflict, and financial challenges. Nishikanth (India), whose prior experiences with diversity came from extensive traveling away from his home country, shared, "I was out of the country far away—*far* means thousands of miles away from my home place. So I wasn't homesick or anything. And I didn't have any expectation as I was coming to a different country." Nevertheless, he noted the academic challenges he encountered in the initial period of his transition into the U.S. academic system, stating, "The first semester was a little shaky for me." Participants reported having experienced varying levels of stress depending on the challenges they encountered. Ketty (Thailand), who lost her PhD funding, shared her extreme stress:

I came for PhD, but I got a master's degree last year because the funding stopped. When you come, and as an international student, you think that you will get funding. But when you get just the master's, it made me very broken down.

Other students had experienced more moderate levels of stress. Lucas (China) shared his resistance to pursuing social interaction:

I seldom went out of my room if there was nothing necessary. . . . They talked a lot about going to big party. But I didn't have any fun. It kind of made it stressful to try to come out. I was kind of scared.

Individual Nature of Religious/Spiritual Experiences

The phenomenon of religious/spiritual experience varied in concept, belief, practice, tradition, and intensity among the participants. This theme highlighted overlap and distinctiveness of religion/spirituality as understood and experienced by the participants. Three subthemes contributed to a deeper understanding of individual experiences.

Religion and spirituality as interchangeable and as separate constructs. In general, participants who identified as religious used the constructs of religion and spirituality interchangeably, while nonreligious students used them separately. The two participants from India revealed within-group variability pertaining to their understanding of the meaning of spirituality and religiosity.

Kashyap (India) noted, “Well, this is the thing about spirituality and religion. I consider them two separate things.” Reflecting a different perspective, Nishikanth reported,

I follow spiritual rituals. In the coming days, we will be celebrating Navaratri [a Hindu festival]. What I will do is I will completely not eat any food grains. [That] means I will be on fruits and milk. That’s it. I follow these things strictly.

On the other hand, Lucas considered his spirituality as not related to God or any theistic form of spiritual experience, but to an inner strength. He stated, “I am not religious. But regarding spiritual experiences, it is experienced like when you have fear or are afraid to do something; you have to force yourself to do it because you will be stronger.”

Religion/spirituality as a personal experience and as a daily pursuit. Most participants approached God, or a sovereign power, through both personal and experiential ways of spirituality rather than through reason and rationality. Those who engaged in religious practices shared about their personally meaningful spiritual experiences. Mike (Cameroon) shared, “The moment I start feeling stress, I have to check my prayer life. The moment I start to feel worried, I check, ‘How often have I prayed today?’”

Distinct religious/spiritual practices. Participants used various expressions of religion/spirituality to cope with acculturative stress. Christians practiced belief in God, prayer, scripture reading, and spending time with people of similar faith; Hindus practiced scripture reading, yoga, meditation, and spending time with people of similar faith; the Muslim student engaged in prayer and scripture reading; and the Buddhist student practiced prayers using chanting and meditation. Additionally, students who identified as spiritual but not religious were involved in religious yoga, meditation, and scripture reading of their choice; Lucas viewed his spirituality as an inner force and instinct and as a source of motivation.

Chrystal (South Korea), who was Christian, shared a purposeful view of God, stating, “God had a plan to send me here, so I just try to put the faith in there.” Luna (Ecuador), a Buddhist, employed yoga and meditation to cope with stress, explaining, “I used to have some time for meditation. I try to close my eyes for 10 minutes per day and try to not thinking anything and after that think of myself and my God.” Others enjoyed being a part of a church organization. Bob, a Christian, stated, “I think, altogether, the church is really helping most of us to cope with the system.” Lucas derived strength from trusting in his instinct:

For me, spirituality is like some figure you have to inspire yourself. . . . My figure is like, I think before I do. So I think cautiously. Some guys are like brave enough to do things. I think that’s called spiritual. Something that’s in their mind that helps them to deal with things.

Impact of Religion/Spirituality on Acculturative Stress

Fueled by their individual beliefs, participants’ religion/spirituality affected their adjustment to the U.S. culture and academic system. Regardless of

theoretical and practical differences between various religious traditions and spiritual beliefs, use of religion/spirituality contributed to hope, courage, perseverance, and resilience in the face of stress and discouraging circumstances. Three subthemes enhanced this theme.

Religion/spirituality as a psychological resource. Religion/spirituality provided a sense of peace, encouragement, motivation, resilience, courage, perseverance, and hope as participants dealt with acculturative stress. Bob, a Christian, stated, “It is the buffer. It sucks the pressure off of me, and it lets you understand that it’s okay to go through these things because God is in control, and he takes you through all the challenges.”

Religion/spirituality as a cognitive resource. Religion/spirituality positively influenced participants’ sense of direction, sound thinking, ability to focus, and increased concentration. It helped them deal with educational system differences and pressures. Brian (Cameroon), who was Christian, alluded to God as the one who was giving him the ability to understand difficult academic concepts. He shared his experience:

I find a text that was difficult at first, I find myself working through it. So I have derived a strategy before I sit down to do any assignment, I pray for God to give me that understanding. If that doesn’t work that day, then I know that God still wants me, not just do the assignment. But to redo that understanding, actually.

Jessica, a Muslim, grew more interested in praying as she noticed it helped her think more clearly: “It’s helpful I think because when I pray, I feel more relaxed, and I think better. That’s why if I’m so stressed, I just want to spend time to pray more.”

Religion/spirituality as a social resource. The social impact of religion/spirituality helped participants develop a relationship with God or the sovereign power, deal with pressures related to relationships, and expand social support through involvement in spiritual communities. Daisy (India), who was New Age spiritual, stated that her religious/spiritual experience improved social interaction and connection with people with similar beliefs: “Then you know . . . I do believe that to sing for God is a gift also. I used to do that when I sang with my friend. That was the best way of socializing, to sing together for God.” Other participants endorsed this. Ketty described the impact the church had on her well-being: “So, later on, I went to a Chinese church. The church helps me. I have also attended the Christian group the university campus has. They believe in the same God like me.”

Utilization of Nonreligious/Spiritual Coping Methods

While religion/spirituality played a major role in the lives of our participants, they also reported using nonreligious/spiritual coping mechanisms. They employed both situation-specific and dispositional coping strategies that exerted a substantial impact on their well-being, and we classified these coping strategies into two categories: positive coping mechanisms and negative

coping mechanisms. The positive coping mechanisms included intracultural coping (creating friendships with people they could relate to in some way), intercultural coping (immersion in U.S. society by seeking and making friendships from the host community members), and dispositional resilience and personal discipline (spirit of resiliency and disciplining of oneself). For instance, Angel (India) stated, “I have this positive trait that, in stress, I work harder. It makes me go. I do my work more enthusiastically. So stress makes me work more. So under stress, I work more, kind of.” On the other hand, negative coping mechanisms reflected participants’ tendency to engage in coping behaviors to save face, for fear of being judged by the host society members. Luna reported that lack of English competency contributed to her behavioral disengagement:

The only strategy was not to show up. I felt overwhelmed with a lot of issues, and I opted not to say anything to anyone. The strategy was not good because that was not helping me to interact with anyone.

Barriers and Responses to Religious/Spiritual Experiences

Some participants shared the obstacles they had encountered when overtly expressing their religion/spirituality on campus. This theme included experiencing discrimination in the classroom and research groups and hostility toward their religious/spiritual expression. Being discriminated against resulted in social anxiety, behavioral disengagement, and even loss of spiritual fervor. Bob stated,

I was the only . . . Christian, and an American guy who is in the same year tells me that only a dumb person believes in God. So, who else do you speak with? And also, you are Black, you are African, and also from a very poor, remote part of Africa. So, your belief in God is what makes you poor, an African. How would you feel? You cannot be an academic, and you can believe in God. It is not possible.

Alluding to the religious/spiritual services that universities can provide to help students to cope with stress, Kashyap, who was of Hindu faith, expressed the difficulties of introducing such services:

Even if the university offers transcendental meditation, some students would say, “Okay, meditation, breathe in and breathe out,” and they might make fun of it. It might not be well received from the student society. Because it is some meditation, and it relates to religion and which is not supposed to be cool. Even if people want to do that, they would say, “What others might think?”

Helpful Services: Foster a Holistic Worldview

Participants talked about current university services that were helpful along with services they wished they had. Some felt welcomed by their university upon entering the United States. Jessica explained, “The people who work

in the international office, they are so nice. When we came, they came to the airport to pick us up, and they put us in the dorm, and they were so nice.” Desired services varied based on the cultural experiences and spiritual/religious orientation of participants. Participants advocated for promotion of ethnic understanding, understanding of spiritual/religious services, and outreach activities to enhance utilization of counseling services. They recommended the development of a holistic worldview across the university campus, including intellectual as well as emotional, spiritual, and personality development. They suggested promoting cultural exchange, which in turn would ease the stress in the classroom, on campus, and in society as a whole.

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the observation that adjusting to the U.S. culture seemed to be solely left to international students without any efforts from the university to understand them. Mike suggested,

People should try to understand each other before making or drawing conclusions. . . . You know respect is reciprocal. Sometimes you might misunderstand somebody. . . . The only way to let them see what you are, who you are or the culture you have is to tell them. Silence makes people assume things. Sometimes you get to assume things that are wrong.

They also conveyed the importance of integrating religion/spirituality into counseling and wellness programs and introducing the availability of such activities during new student orientation. Bob recommended,

By spirituality, they have to be fair, open, and honest. I think what has to be done is to incorporate spirituality into the counseling systems. . . . I think that if they introduce it in the counseling systems . . . and you tell them [students], “Hey, you know what? There is another dimension to all these things. So, do you consider God is helping you?”

Discussion

In this study, we investigated the impact of religion and spirituality on acculturative stress among international students. Our findings can contribute to improving counselors’ and campus personnel’s understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of international students. Our participants hailed from a wide variety of cultures, traditions, and societies and brought with them a diverse array of personal, spiritual, and existential belief systems. They endorsed religious/spiritual, nonreligious/spiritual, theistic, and nontheistic beliefs and practices, offering counselors an initial empirical understanding of the personal variability and subjective nature of religious/spiritual experiences among international students. Participants who aligned with a theistic orientation cited practices and beliefs consistent with Power and McKinney’s (2014) description of intrinsic spirituality/religion. The participants held their belief as an ultimate value in and of itself, while still turning to their spirituality for coping in times of stress. We had only one participant identifying a more nontheistic orientation, and he reported practices consistent with extrinsic spirituality/religion (Power & McKinney,

2014). He used his spirituality when he needed relief or safety. Over half the participants spoke of religion and spirituality as synonyms, implying a move toward inclusiveness and inviting individuals from diverse religious/spiritual traditions and worldviews to be able to define who they are and what they practice in the sacred dimension of their lives.

Our results support previous findings from quantitative studies (e.g., Andrade & Evans, 2009; Chai et al., 2012; Gardner et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2009) on the buffering effects of religion/spirituality on the psychological and social impact of acculturative stress. The key findings of our study include the specific characteristics of religious/spiritual coping mechanisms participants have used and the extent to which participants with different religions/spiritual orientations have relied on various forms of religious/spiritual coping strategies. Additionally, we found that religion/spirituality had an impact on participants' cognitive performance and academic success, suggesting that religion and spirituality affect the way some students think, hope, behave, and perform in an academic environment. Successful academic performance improves persistence to graduation and attaining long-term personal and career goals. Higher graduation rates of international students help universities fulfill their mission to contribute to the global economy by providing services and furthering personal and intellectual development (Andrade & Evans, 2009).

Our participants reported that religious discrimination in the classroom and in research groups led to behavioral disengagement and loss of spiritual fervor, suggesting that intolerance both discourages students and exacerbates acculturative stress. Yet, religion/spirituality held a central place in the participants' coping repertoires. Along with enhancing their faith in themselves, religion/spirituality helped participants create enduring coping strategies.

Limitations

We collected data from a small, purposive sample of international students from two public research universities in rural areas of the United States. Students from urban university campuses might have given different feedback, yielding different results. The environmental settings of the communities where individuals live might also influence the acculturation process depending on the presence of people from their ethnic communities where they reside (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Additionally, we intentionally selected participants who identified as religious/spiritual, which certainly affected the degree to which religion and spirituality played a role in their narratives. It is unknown how and to what extent a broader selection of international students would apply similar strategies or where they would position religion/spirituality in the acculturation and coping process.

Implications

The diverse nature of spiritual and religious beliefs among our participants, coupled with their endorsement of discrimination on campus, underscores

the ethical need for college counselors' mastery of the spiritual and religious competencies posited by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC; 2009), particularly in their work with international students. Counseling interventions honoring individual spirituality may be incorporated into assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning, and service delivery (ASERVIC, 2009) without imposing the counselors' own religious/spiritual values on the clients (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). Particularly as it applies to clients presenting with acculturative stress, religious/spiritual activities and beliefs of each student should be integrated into the development of strategies and exercises that bolster resilience, wellness, and positive well-being. Counselors could offer these in the support groups they lead on campus, being careful not to impose their values on group members (ACA, 2014). They would first need to assess whether the students consider religion or spirituality as part of their identity or as a personal strength, whether the students consider religion or spirituality when coping with difficulties they encounter, and whether there are any specific religious or spiritual practices the students find helpful for coping. Then, counselors could explore religious and spiritual themes with them while addressing their presenting concerns. Doing so could reinforce coping and help increase appreciation of diversity among students.

Counseling center supervisors and counselor educators may use our findings to supplement clinical supervision by encouraging trainees to identify and understand their own values, beliefs, biases, and assumptions about religion/spirituality, leading to better recognition of the religious/spiritual needs of their clients (ASERVIC, 2009; Dobmeier & Reiner, 2012). Counselors should improve knowledge about diverse religious/spiritual traditions and worldviews through discussion forums; collaboration with international student services offices; and social exchanges between faculty, counselors, staff, and students. As evidenced by the cross endorsement of competencies from ASERVIC, the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling, and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, spirituality and religion should be seen as multicultural constructs, helping us understand who our clients truly are and how to best serve and advocate for them (ACA, 2014).

Students' experiences of not feeling safe to express themselves highlight the critical need for student affairs professionals to develop programming that encourages sensitivity and fosters students' religious/spiritual identity and development. Policies and processes should be examined to ensure they are not inadvertently contributing to a lack of safety. Campus personnel could develop and implement religious/spiritual freedom programs to facilitate student expression of their identities on campus and in the classroom. Examples might include curricular strategies, such as encouraging faculty to provide opportunities that create a safe environment for students to discuss (written or oral) meaning and purpose through their religious/spiritual lens, as appropriate and relevant for the class. Cocurricular programs might include interfaith dialogue through seminars or workshops on campus to help engage students and faculty in discussions of

religion/spirituality. Current diversity training in universities should include spiritual/religious diversity, along with ethnic, sexual orientation, and physical disability diversity (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Tisdell, 2003). Faculty and staff should be trained to be sensitive to religious/spiritual diversity among all students, and not just among international students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Our findings suggest the need to develop statistical measures geared to the variety of spiritual and religious traditions as they are practiced in diverse cultures. Quantitative investigation of specific religious/spiritual practices in specific countries or belief systems could inform the development of appropriate counseling strategies. Research among international students at urban universities would supplement our findings. Ultimately, we recommend the development of best practices for honoring religious/spiritual identities in international students.

The religious/spiritual diversity of our participants mirrors the plurality of belief systems that prevail in the United States. We encourage the development of a new culture in which the religious/spiritual dimensions of all students are explored and supported by university personnel. Finally, we encourage the development of best practices that will minimize discrimination and marginalization of international students as they blend their cultural and religious/spiritual identities.

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