INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND PSYCHOLOGY: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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The integration of faith and psychology has been a topic of discussion for decades (Francis, 2005). Often considered a personal matter and taboo to discuss, religious beliefs impact perspectives on topics including sexual expression, marital roles, and death (Canda & Furman, 2010). Varying points of view regarding the ability to successfully merge the two range from those who feel it is possible and necessary to those who feel that the two disciplines should be kept completely separate. While many Bible colleges and Christian universities see the necessity and the possibilities that are present in regards to integrating a Christian perspective into the psychology discipline, the struggle remains how to do this effectively. Garzon and Lewis Hall (2012) noted that the resources available to help faculty with integration are scarce or outdated. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to gain foundational information at a non-denominational Christian university in the southwest United States to determine if and how faculty in the psychology department integrate faith into the curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are varying views regarding the appropriate relationship between psychology and theology (McMinn, Moon, & McCormick, 2009). Some believe the two disciplines should remain independent from each other, while others believe that where one is apparent, the other should remain silent (McMinn et al., 2009). However, there are some Christian universities that have accepted the challenge of integrating psychology and Christian teachings.

Christian universities can promote or impede the teaching and integration of faith. Creating an environment of openness, safety, and a value of integration promotes successful implementation (Garzon & Lewis, 2012). With this in mind, faculty who do not have experience in implementing faith into their disciplines, can be supported or discouraged from developing curriculum and pedagogy that support the integration of faith.

Christian colleges and universities have different expectations of their faculty regarding how faith should be implemented, but often considerations and the training necessary to successfully integrate faith and curriculum are not provided (Reeder & Pacino, 2013). Therefore, faculty in these institutions are left on their own to determine the best way to integrate faith. This may be seamless for some who have had theological training and may be very difficult for others.

Faculty possess different perspectives in regards to the implementation of faith. In an interview conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) (2013), with a leading expert in psychology and religion, Kenneth Pargament, it was noted that faculty may have avoided integrating psychology and religion due to the lack of training in this area. Various feelings ranging from fear to curiosity are sparked when this topic is broached (Hunt, 2014). Some faculty feel frightened due to not being appealing, but also feel inadequately trained to integrate faith into their discipline. Finally, there are some faculty who feel this activity is not only useful but necessary; they may have formal training or may have a strong faith base established from their experiences in their personal and professional lives (Hunt, 2014).

The dilemmas described above can be overcome by providing support and resources to guide faculty to become proficient in this area. However, faculty need to take responsibility and seek opportunities for continued training (Reeder & Pacino, 2013). Tan (2012) suggested that psychologists without formal theological training take classes in theology and study the Bible to gain an understanding that is
necessary for successful integration. Nwosu (1998) recommended that study groups be established specifically designed to focus on the integration of faith and learning. In addition, Nwosu (1998) recommended that campuses provide trainings to help teachers gain the necessary knowledge needed for successful implementation. Purposeful monthly training focusing on integration of faith and learning are a necessary part of professional development.

Nwosu (1998) found that many schools sponsored seminars on integration of faith and learning and quality material was presented in them. The problem stemmed from the practical application of the knowledge. Instructors were not given the opportunity, support, or encouragement to practice or internalize what was learned. Rasmussen and Rasmussen (2009) supported this claim, stating that current literature does not address practical implication; therefore, the knowledge gained is not effectively transferred into the curriculum and implemented in the classroom.

CURRICULUM INTEGRATION

Dykstra, Foster, Kleiner, and Koch (1995) proposed different levels of integration including modeling personal faith, integrative discussions, integrative readings, and course integration. Integration should be purposeful as well as organic. Not only should the content of the courses be considered, but the experience and comfort level of the faculty members must also be taken into consideration. Cooperation and communication among faculty provided the opportunity to share goals, illustrate efforts being made to integrate, coordinate efforts, and become more unified as a department (Dykstra et al., 1995). Study groups provided the opportunity for instructors and administrators to collaborate and develop personal skills for integration of faith and learning (Nwosu, 1998).

FACULTY COLLABORATION

Collaboration provides the opportunity to assess and discuss topics related to faith. Recently, the field of psychology has placed emphasis on exploring topics such as meditation, forgiveness, acceptance, gratitude, hope, and love (APA, 2013). Most people can participate in discussion on these matters regardless of their religious background and experience. However, it is important to note that these topics have deep roots in religious traditions (APA, 2013). By collaborating with colleagues and other experts who represent different religious backgrounds, faculty have the opportunity to become more comfortable with the topics that relate to faith integration and can share integration strategies (Hunt, 2014).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Francis (2005) found that interdisciplinary integration benefited the disciplines of psychology and theology. Theologians can help psychologists to understand faith from a personal and professional perspective. Psychologists can help theologians gain a deeper understanding of human behavior and personality (Francis, 2005). Collaboration between theologians and psychologists provide the opportunity to share practices, which strengthens both professions. Theologians benefited from academic inquiry skills developed and used by psychologists. Psychologists benefited from a deeper understanding of Christian worldview and an opportunity to discuss faith. Psychologists and theologians can share knowledge, ideas, and practices that can only benefit the professionals and students in both disciplines.

Department Collaboration

Numerous studies revealed the importance of faculty collaboration in determining effective ways to successfully integrate faith into the psychology curriculum (Kok, Zwart, Jossink, Madeiros-Ward, & Witteveen, 2011; Wolf, 2012; Reeder & Pacino, 2013; Hunt, 2014). By collaborating with colleagues, ideas are shared, which help to inform curriculum development, and the faculty are also engaged in discussions that help to provide new ideas to implement into the curriculum. Formal strategies can be considered and added to the curriculum to allow for purposeful and consistent integration across the curriculum. Faculty collaboration can assist with the completion of a program review to illustrate where revisions to the curriculum should be considered. This has been a goal of many psychology departments (Dykstra et al., 1995). Bethel (2004) found that courses such as Human Behavior, Practice, and Diversity were areas into which faith was easily implemented. However, based upon the experience of each faculty member, some may feel more comfortable spontaneously integrating faith into topics than others. By reviewing course
content, the department can discuss and consider changes. This provides the opportunity to consider course content and determine the appropriate level of integration.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

There are benefits for students when curriculum is integrated with faith. When students graduate with a bachelor’s degree in psychology, they need the skills and knowledge to work with a diverse group of individuals. Hunt (2014) reported that acknowledging the faith of clients increased cultural competence. Psychology students have the potential to work in domestic settings or may choose to pursue employment opportunities internationally. Acknowledgement of faith provides a deeper understanding of personal faith and allows for a better understanding of others’ faith base. Students need to be prepared to discuss the subject of faith successfully as professionals and integrate spiritual content into their work and professional field. Being able to discern the faith background of another person can help to determine when this is professionally appropriate (Hunt, 2014). It also allows for contribution to a conversation without feeling uncomfortable, due to being prepared.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

It is clear that a variety of collaborative integrative methods benefit students personally and professionally. However, Matthias (2008) indicated in an article written that little research had been done on the personal experiences of professors who integrate faith well. Garzon and Lewis (2012) recommend that advancements in the development of integration learning theory and increasing applied integration resources in subject-specific areas need to be explored. This can be done through collaboration with colleagues within the same discipline and from other disciplines.

Collaboration and interaction with others who are integrating faith and discipline were themes that resonated through a variety of studies on this topic (Matthias, 2008; McMinn, et al., 2009; Reeder & Pacino, 2013; Tan, 2013). McMinn, Moon, and McCormick (2009) pointed out the collaborative process in writing the article they presented. They stated that the collaborative process presented new way to think about “teaching and learning integration” (p. 46). Collaboration not only provided new ideas, but also encouraged faculty as they considered and engaged in integrative practices (McMinn et al., 2009). In addition, Tan (2013) stated the importance of community and collaboration with other faculty who are engaging in the practice of integrating faith and psychology. Christians were created to live in community with one another; therefore, it makes sense that faith integration in teaching and learning is a communal experience that requires relationships to be built and safe environments to be created to allow for discussions, inquiry, and critical analysis of faith and discipline. Reeder and Pacino (2013) stated that collaboration with colleagues to share ideas for curriculum, pedagogy, and resources is important. Therefore, this study addressed the collaborative process of faculty through the use of a focus group to gain insights regarding how faculty integrate faith. This format also provided a setting to share ideas and generate discussions regarding faith integration in the field of psychology.

The literature outlines many benefits of focus group research. Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman and Geist (2011) reviewed the history of focus groups and discussed their development from one-on-one interviews. Historically, focus groups have been used since World War II to address issues such as morale, and they have gained popularity over time in marketing research. By the 1980s focus groups were being used more frequently in social science research (Rodriguez et al, 2011).

Focus groups have been successful in gathering information during exploratory or initial phases of research. Topics that arise during a focus group can be used to formulate further research questions and aid in the direction of future research. According to Gibbs (1997), there are benefits to the participants of the focus group as well. It can be empowering for participants to feel they are involved in a collaborative process for change. While participants are answering questions from the moderator, they may also ask questions of each other and this can stimulate new ideas (Gibbs, 1997). Focus groups provide deeper information than a questionnaire might. When certain topics or ideas arise, the moderator can focus on them and query participants for more information. While answers on a questionnaire provide a response, they don’t allow for immediate follow-up or further discussion. This rich information is a benefit of focus groups.
This study will implement the use of focus groups to gain information from psychology faculty regarding if and how they implement faith into the curriculum. This study will help to provide insight regarding the personal experiences of the faculty who are implementing faith into their classes, and it will add to the body of literature on this topic. Finally, it will provide a safe environment to share ideas and promote collaboration with colleagues.

METHODS

Focus groups consist of participants that are selected based upon their ability to provide specialized knowledge and insight to the topic being studied (Rabiee, 2004). Focus groups also encourage discussion and expression regarding information concerning motivation and behavior as well as attitudes and perceptions. All elements are applicable to the topic of integration of faith into curriculum. This was determined to be the best method for the study proposed, because of the exploratory and descriptive nature.

Twelve faculty members from a Christian university in the southwest, who teach psychology courses were invited to participate in a focus group. The faculty members were from various modalities, including face-to-face and online, and they taught in various capacities for the university, including full time and adjunct faculty. Purposive sampling was used to select participants.

Focus groups are assembled by researchers using purposive samples; participants are selected, because they have some interest or connection to the topic being researched (Morgan, 1997). According to Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996), “purposive sampling is a procedure by which researchers select a subject or subjects based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study” (p. 58).

While purposive samples are not representative samples, they are important, because participants are chosen to share their expertise on a specific topic (Rabiee, 2004). Choosing a randomly selected group will not provide the researcher with the information needed, as randomly selected individuals may not have any expertise or opinions on the topic at hand. Morgan (1997) discussed the importance of having a focus group population where the participants have background regarding the topic, ensuring that they will have something to discuss and that they are homogenous enough that they can comfortably discuss the topic as a group.

In this study, researchers chose a sample of faculty who could provide insight on integrating faith in psychology classes. This helped to ensure that there was faculty representation from ground and online modalities and that full time faculty as well as adjunct faculty were represented. Of the twelve faculty members who were invited to participate, seven agreed to be part of the study. There were two full-time ground faculty members, three full time online faculty members, and two ground adjunct faculty members. Two participants were male and five were female.

Subjects were asked about their personal experience with faith integration in their curriculum. The questions presented fell into three categories including motivation, communication, and social behaviors. The focus group was guided by three questions:

1. How do you integrate faith into your curriculum?
2. What topics lead to easy implementation of faith?
3. How are ideas for implementing faith into curriculum generated?

Faculty were divided into two groups and were presented with one question at a time. They were provided with pens and post-it notes and asked to generate responses to each question presented. Each response was written on a post-it note. While documenting their ideas, they were encouraged to share and discuss the ideas within their group. After a time limit of five minutes, the groups were asked to share the ideas, topics, and themes that emerged from their discussion with the whole group. This allowed for other group members to consider their responses and add them to the topic presented if they felt there were similarities between them. The facilitators observed both groups combining topics that were similar during their five minutes to generate responses. During the group discussions, both groups began to combine topics that were similar. When asked to present to the whole group, they presented a topic of discussion and any post-it note responses that related to the topic proposed. The other group was provided the opportunity to
add any of their responses to the topic. The answers were added to a large sheet of butcher paper. The post-it notes were divided into the different topics proposed by the groups. Themes that were presented were being coded as the presentation of new ideas and discussion regarding the ideas took place.

RESULTS

Coding was organically taking place during the focus group. The members of the groups and the two groups together were discussing and determining what topics had similarities and grouping the topics together. They were working together to discuss the topics presented and to determine if there was agreement among all participants regarding how the topics were being grouped. After the focus group ended, the researchers reviewed the responses and determined that the groups that were created formed different themes, which are described in detail below.

Integration of Faith

When posed the first question, “How do you integrate faith into your curriculum?”, responses fit into two main themes: Purposeful and Planned, and Behavior-Based or Natural Techniques. Responses included in the Purposeful and Planned category were sharing relevant sermons, posting daily Bible verses online, and sharing biblical passages that relate to class material in the classroom and through the online platform, for example through Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs). Instructors who desired to integrate faith, but lacked the knowledge and training to do so, could begin by incorporating this type of implementation. However, it was noted that instructors may need more training to feel competent integrating faith in these ways.

The second theme that emerged from this question was Behavior-Based or Natural Techniques. Answers that fit under this category included modeling love and behaviors through conversations, connecting the beliefs brought by the student to the content of class, critical thinking through class discussions or questions, self-applications of challenges (for example, spirituality and stress) and including questions that relate a student’s world view to course materials. The strategies for integrating faith into the curriculum that are Behavior-Based or Natural Techniques were thought to be more naturally completed by instructors. There was less of an emphasis on actual biblical verses or passages and more of a focus on leading by example and discussing different points of view that would occur naturally throughout the course.

Integration in Psychology

When presented with the question, “What topics lead to easy implementation of faith in your classes?”, seven different themes emerged, including Health and Wellness, Death, Dying and Grief, Relationships, Mental Health, APA Code of Ethics, Development, and Controversial or Sensitive Topics.

Under each theme, different examples of the response provided and coded by the participants were presented. In the first category, health and wellness, participants volunteered topics including stress and coping, wellness dimensions, meditation and prayer for stress alleviation and health and wellness. When death, dying and grief were mentioned, participants indicated that these were natural topics to integrate with faith, as many individuals turn to faith during times of loss. Closure centers on ceremonies such as funerals which are often conducted by a church official, a pastor or priest. The third category was relationships. Some sample topics in this category include Gottman’s theories on relationships, marriage success, relationship satisfaction, and divorce. Mental health was the fourth category and included normal and abnormal behavior, using Christian counseling perspective, personality and disorders, positive psychology and Carl Rogers’ ethics, obedience, compliance and conformity, and The Stanford Prison Study. The topic of development considered topics such as birth, adolescence, emerging adulthood, and aging throughout the lifespan. Finally, the last category was controversial or sensitive topics. Pornography, prostitution, adolescent sexual activity, teen pregnancy, human rights issues, euthanasia, and rights of a fetus were topics that the participants included under this category. The vast array of topics presented in the focus group illustrated how the field of psychology can include faith integration in numerous ways.

Implementation Resources

The final question, “How are ideas for implementing faith into the curriculum generated?”, led to interesting findings. Participants provided responses that fit into four categories. The categories included collaboration, personal experience,
Participants also credited university trainings for providing suggestions for implementing faith into the curriculum. These trainings included presentation such as the Lunch and Learn series and Faith and Learning workshops. The Lunch and Learn series at the Christian university studied is a monthly event at which different faculty members share their experiences integrating faith into the classroom. The Faith and Learning workshops are also offered at this university to assist faculty in their ability to integrate faith into the curriculum.

Finally, participants reported that ideas for implementing faith into the curriculum also came from the learners. Impromptu class discussions and face-to-face interactions with students led to a deeper understanding of their faith backgrounds. This provided a foundation on which to build further discussions. Additionally, candid conversations with students inspired conversations without judgment and allowed for integration of faith.

DISCUSSION

This study provided a great deal of insight into how the Psychology faculty are integrating faith into their classrooms. Focus groups consisted of participants who were selected based upon their ability to provide specialized knowledge and insight into the topic being studied (Rabiei, 2004). This was determined to be the best research method for this study, because of the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study proposed. The focus group also encouraged discussion and expression regarding information concerning motivation, behavior, attitudes, and perceptions. All of these elements are applicable to the topic of integration of faith into curriculum.

There were two primary ways that faculty expressed integrating faith into the curriculum, through purposeful and planned inclusion techniques and through behavior-based strategies. This suggests that there is more than one avenue to focus on when integrating faith into the classroom. For some instructors, faith integration will include sharing relevant sermons, posting daily Bible verses online, and sharing biblical passages that relate to class material. For other instructors incorporating behavior-based strategies, such as leading by example and modeling love to their students, will be more comfortable and readily used to integrate faith.

The knowledge and comfort level of the instructor will help to guide the type of integration methods used. Sharing relevant sermons, posting daily Bible verses online, and sharing biblical passages that relate to class material may appear to be a superficial type of implementation and may appear to be forced rather than organic, if the instructor lacks confidence in his/her ability to successfully integrate faith or the adequate knowledge necessary to incorporate this type of information. In order to help combat this issue, the curriculum may be revised in some classes, implementing activities that incorporate faith integration. This may be improved through curriculum revisions that build integration actively into lessons, where appropriate. However, the curriculum will need to be supported with resources and training to ensure that the faculty understand the intent of the material and are comfortable covering it. It was suggested in the focus groups that the activities considered be focused on topics that lead to easy integration of faith.

Participants in the study brainstormed a variety of topics related to the field of psychology which they felt lead to easy integration of faith. This brainstorming indicated that faculty perceived that it was possible to integrate faith into the psychology curriculum. The belief that it is possible and necessary is important, because it was suggested in the literature review that some professionals opposed the integration, believing the two entities should remain completely separate (McMinn et al., 2009). One recommendation made by the participants was to create lesson plans that align with these topics and that could assist faculty in integrating faith into their classrooms. The lesson plans would be especially helpful to faculty who want to integrate faith into their classroom but feel less confident in doing so.

Lastly, the results suggest that ideas for integrating faith come from a variety of sources.
Personal experiences, collaboration, university trainings, and interaction with learners all provide insight into faith integration. This is a positive finding, because while personal experiences are one avenue to incorporating faith in the curriculum, if an individual does not have personal experiences to share, the other avenues can assist in integration.

Additionally, instructors who are open to discussions that naturally arise throughout the course provide students the opportunity to explore their stance on faith integration. This takes some of the responsibility off of the instructor and allows the students’ voices to be heard. It is believed that this approach might be better for instructors who may fear that students may have a stronger faith base, as well as for students without a strong Christian background. These behavior-based, natural techniques could help engage students who are not Christians by demonstrating Christ-like behavior.

This study provides an excellent introduction and foundation regarding the possibilities of integrating faith into curriculum. Regardless of the teaching modality, faculty status, or level of experience, there are a variety of possibilities to consider in regards to integrating faith. It suggests that while personal experiences are important, there are a variety of avenues that can assist faculty in integrating faith into the classroom.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provided a great deal of information from Psychology faculty in different modalities, a small sample size was used. It would be beneficial to conduct a study using a larger sample size, possibly consisting of psychology faculty from a variety of Christian universities. In addition, this study could be replicated by different disciplines. Similar studies could be conducted in different disciplines to determine if and how faith is implemented into various disciplines. This foundational information can be used to develop resources and provide trainings. It is also a great way to begin a discussion focused on faith integration and a specific discipline.

Further exploration of the question, “what topics lead to easy implementation of faith into your classes?” would be especially important to explore. This would provide insight regarding possible curriculum changes that could be considered to provide lesson plans to instructors as a resource to be used to implement faith into the curriculum. After the implementation of faith into different topics within the curriculum, a study may be necessary to determine if the implementation felt genuine and organic. Faculty and students could provide feedback to help make this determination.

Professional learning communities (PLC) may be effective platforms for transferring knowledge and gaining necessary skills to successfully integrate faith and learning within a variety of disciplines. Discipline specific or interdisciplinary groups can be used to share ideas, provide support, and give feedback to members in the group. A future study could be conducted to determine if this is a good method to help promote the integration of faith and learning.

In addition, future research focused on student perspectives may lead to better implementation. A similar study using focus groups can be conducted with students to gain their perspectives regarding the integration of faith in the curriculum. This could be beneficial because it may provide insight regarding students’ needs and desires regarding faith integration. It may also be interesting to gain student and faculty perspective regarding the integration of faith campus wide within the university community.

CONCLUSION

Every institution has a unique way of interpreting and implementing integration of faith and learning. This study provides insights regarding the implementation of faith into the psychology curriculum at one Christian university in the southwest, but more importantly, it serves as a reminder that faculty collaboration is a powerful tool. Faculty members can provide each other support and share ideas and resources to help enhance the implantation of faith into the psychology curriculum.

By discussing integration of faith within the psychology department, faculty can share ideas and apply them in classes they are teaching. This collaboration can lead to an increased level of confidence in one’s ability to effectively integrate faith into the curriculum. The small group setting also provides a safe environment to ask questions and discuss experiences with colleagues. This allows for feedback or advice to be provided, which may benefit colleagues in their quest to integrate faith into the curriculum.
References


