

Conceptualizing the Perceived Meaning of Workplace Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of a significant number of studies on workplace spirituality and religion, this paper aims to comprehend the employee's insight regarding perception and understanding of the meaning of workplace spirituality and religion. The term workplace spirituality implies some form of religious connotation by many people. The crux of the problem is to answer the research question that what is workplace spirituality? The meaning of spirituality is so diverse that individuals are not able to comprehend the definition and agreed upon. Similarly, the confusion that spirituality is same as religion leads to inquire in the area of interest with reference to academic staff of public sector universities. Data were collected through interviews from 21 faculty members working in public sector universities and analyzed through thematic analysis. The study contributes to the fact that spirituality in the workplace is subjective in nature and a mixed perception about the similarity and difference of spirituality and religion in the workplace has been determined and most respondents perceived workplace spirituality as a separate concept apart from religion in organizations.

Keywords: *Workplace spirituality, Religion, Higher education institutions.*

1- Introduction

Researchers have tried to define spirituality in several ways, but no definition of the concept is comprehensive and agreed upon due to its abstract nature. Since, the conception of spirituality varies from person to person, a complete definition does not qualify and capture the whole spirit of spirituality (Houghton, Neck, & Krishnakumar, 2016¹; Marques, Dhiman, & King, 2007²). One of the central issues regarding workplace spirituality is that many people view spirituality in the workplace through the lens of religion. Barnett, Krell, and Sendry (2000)³ stated that a personal or institutionalized system that has a set of beliefs, practices and values is term as religion. According to Pargament (2001)⁴ religion has been recognized with "rigid" or "formally structured" religious institutions, which are often claimed to control or hinder human potential. While, spirituality is a state of mind and a sense of being. Religion can influence spirituality or influenced by spirituality. Wuff (1997)⁵ stated that religion has been transformed from an abstract concept to a definable system of values and theological traditions.

King (2007)⁶ stated that spirituality and religion are different concepts. However, the extant literature suggests that both religion and workplace spirituality have effect on individuals' lives, behaviors and their working. Allen and Williams (2017)⁷ enlightened that a balance between religion and spirituality in the workplace is essential because the wisdom and traditions of the religion that has been in practice for a long time cannot be ignored. The spiritual characteristics of work have been neglected due to the difficulty of defining spirituality separately from religion and the social norms that largely make religion a distinct subject (Word, 2012)⁸. The subjective nature of the concept also leads to the lack of clarity which leads the researchers to perceive workplace spirituality same as religion and sometime different from it (Tackney et al., 2017)⁹. Any definition of religion and spirituality is limited and debatable and hence this research has tried to identify perceived meaning of workplace spirituality and religion in higher education institutions. Therefore, exploring the relationship between spirituality and religion is important to build the integrity and independence of both disciplines.

The context of the study was the public sector universities and unit of analysis were the academic staff. Numerous researchers were actively searching for meaning and trying to determine ways to complete their lives and that of their institutions but the inner aspects of the development of the faculty members (values, beliefs, hopes, fears and frustrations) receives relatively little consideration (Astin & Oseguera, 2004)¹⁰. Therefore, it is important to recognize that in recent years the external aspects of society were much focused as compared to internal aspects (workplace spirituality and religion) and meaning, particularly in higher education. Thus, this study aims to explore the meaning and perception of workplace spirituality and religion among the academic staff of public sector universities.

1.1. Research Question

This study aims to explore the meaning and perception of workplace spirituality and religion among the academic staff of public sector universities. The research questions of the study were:

Q no.1: What is the perceived meaning of Workplace spirituality and Religion?

Q no.2: Is there any distinction between religion and spirituality?

2- Literature Review

Workplace spirituality is defined as “[. . . the recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community]” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 137)¹¹. Spirituality in the workplace is about feeling of connectedness and compassion with others that enables transcendence. To recognize spirituality and work is to identify that employees are spiritual beings whose souls are nurtured or damaged by work. A process of searching for the meaning of life and a deep understanding of knowledge to reach a higher level is workplace spirituality (Dehler & Welsh, 2003)¹². Ashmos and Duchon (2000)¹¹ stated that “workplace spirituality is about people experiencing a sense of connectedness to one another and their workplace community”(p.135).

Milliman, Gatling, and Bradley-Geist (2017)¹³ stated that a vital idea in the literature on spirituality in the workplace is that people want not only to be competent in their work, but also want to have significant work experience. This type of experience may encompass a variety of facets, such as a sense of transcendence, meaningful work and purpose, a connection with others, the authentic experience of oneself, be at the service of humanity and belong to a better and more ethical organization. Spirituality in the workplace is providing new ideas about behavior in the workplace and a complete understanding of the organization is not possible without considering the spiritual nature of the people there (Benefiel, Fry, & Geigle, 2014)¹⁴.

Harlos (2000)¹⁵ stated that spirituality implies secular and sacred values that is based on transcendence in people's lives. An ultimate purpose of life, strong connections with colleagues and other coworkers, association with work and the alignment between one's belief and values with the organization is spirituality in the workplace (Mitroff & Denton, 1999)¹⁶. Although spirituality in the workplace is a very personal and philosophical concept, but nearly all researchers confine that spirituality is considered a sense of wholeness, deep values and connection at work (Gibbons, 2000)¹⁷.

Workplace spirituality can have many possible ways of defining it. It is a multi-faceted and elusive concept that has no common definition. Guillory (2000)¹⁸ defined it as internal awareness; (Dehler & Welsh, 1994)¹⁹ elaborate it as a specific work feeling that energizes; (Barnett et al., 2000, p. 563)³ describe it as "a process of self- enlightenment " and (Delbecq, 1999, p. 345)²⁰ defined it as "the

unique inner search for the fullest personal development through participation into transcendent mystery". Pargament (2001)⁴ stated that spirituality is a different concept from religion and has taken some components that were previously included in religion. Therefore, the definition of the concept religion becomes narrower and least inclusive. Historically, religion was a "broadband construct" that has focused on both individuals and institutions but is now considered a "narrowband construct" that is more focused only on institutions (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999)²¹.

Values, principles and doctrines that provide an ethical and moral framework for understanding motivation and attitudes is term as religion .For some individual's religion must be limited to the private life of an individual , not to be forced on public organizations (Rhodes, 2003)²² .The Islamic view of spirituality is synonymous with closeness to Allah (God) and is manifested through actions focused on the search for divine pleasure (Dasti & Sitwat, 2014, p. 51)²³ .The difference between religion and spirituality has been debated by many authors (Benefiel et al., 2014¹²; Mitroff & Denton, 1999¹⁶; Tanyi, 2002²⁴).Mitroff and Denton (1999)¹⁶found that people believe that it is inappropriate to talk about religion in the workplace and that spirituality is important to be discussed in the workplace. According to King (2007, p. 108)⁶“Religion is the less appreciated of the two — primarily because of its institutionalized branding — whereas spirituality and its effects are much more acceptable, primarily because of their personal and individual nature”. Barnett et al. (2000)³stated that religion is neither necessary nor enough for spiritual development, nor is spirituality necessary for religious practices.

3- Research Methodology

This study aimed to map the perception of academic staff regarding spirituality in the workplace in public sector universities. The data was collected through interviews to obtain rich information about the concept. The data was collected from 21 faculty members employed in five different public sector universities of the Lahore, Punjab. In the first step the universities were chosen through systematic sampling and in the second step the faculty members were chosen purposively for the interviews. The data collected through interviews were all tape recorded and transcribed later. The interviews recoded were bilingual to keep the interviewees at ease, later the interviews in Urdu language were translated into English keeping the content original. The data were processes through NVivo-12. The collected data was read again and again to obtain the correct information. In qualitative research, thematic analysis is one of the widely used forms of analysis. It is one of the extensively used methods of qualitative analysis to identify and interpret patterns. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns across the qualitative data to address the research questions. Moreover, several data analysis techniques were used, such as cluster analysis, word tree and tree mapping for significant data presentation.

4- Data Analysis and Processing

The analysis has been divided into three sections, first the perceived meaning of workplace spirituality and religion has been identified, secondly the similarity and the difference between the concepts have been investigated and, finally, the interrelatedness of the two concepts has been investigated.

4.1- Perceived Meaning of Workplace Spirituality and Religion

The interviews were conducted from academic staff of selected departments of chosen universities. The study aimed to investigate the perceived meaning of workplace spirituality and religion. With reference to the first research question that is what is the perceived meaning of workplace spirituality and religion? The perceived meaning of both of the term elaborated by one of the interviewees was, “I may say that religion in a big concept whereas workplace spirituality is a smaller component of a religion. Workplace spirituality emphasis that works has purpose greater than oneself. Workplace spirituality is more related to workplace ethics, compassion, tolerance, a sense of responsibility and community integration. It is more related to the approach that, you get what you give. Whereas religion guide us in every action of life, but a non-religious person can also practice workplace spirituality. No matter what religion he belongs to”. Another respondent stated about workplace spirituality and religion as, “Religion can’t be separated from any action of life and workplace spirituality is also considered to an action because it is related to your body which is a combination of soul and matter. Whereas, non-religious person can also practice workplace spirituality”. A faculty member pointed out that “Spirituality directly links with the soul and mind of a being and religion is a way of life; somehow, roots of spirituality comes from religion, but they are different and have diverse implications and are not bound to each other. Spirituality is the part of us; it’s something that cannot be separated from our thinking, actions and self. It’s who we are, it is related to our morals and values that bring us comfort and joy, whereas religion is a set of beliefs, practices and worshipping God”.

A few respondents were of the view that workplace spirituality is related to ethics and religion is a belief system. One interviewee explained that “Religion is our belief system and workplace spirituality is related to ethics. Ethics could be a part of religion, but religion is not a part of ethics”. People irrespective of their religion practice spirituality in the workplace as one of the respondents replied “I consider workplace spirituality as work morality and work ethics. In abroad there are many people with different religion, ethnic groups, and from different regions working together and they all follow work ethics and morality. So, we can say that workplace spirituality is not depended upon religion. Most people consider religion as a private practice and workplace spirituality as a part of work ethics”. Another respondent added to the same perception that “Workplace spirituality is more related to your ethics. Though, religion has role in ethics but the way I look it, as a perspective of my own work rather than religion”.

Another faculty member extended that “Religion is based on your beliefs; beliefs of Muslims, beliefs of Christian, belief or Hindus or any other religion. They vary in their beliefs system. Religion includes worships and prayers; their way of performing varies across religions. Then there are matters of life, ethics and way of living this is related to workplace spirituality. From religion if we separate beliefs and prayers the rest is spirituality because religion also focuses on terms of relationships, ethics and way of living”.

One of the respondents opined that modification through training can be made in spirituality, but modification is not possible in religion as one of the respondents pointed out that “In my point of view workplace spirituality has deeper roots in ethics. Whereas religion is mostly you inherit from your forefathers/ancestors. Religion has set rules, but workplace spirituality can be attained through training. You can make modification to enhance spirituality through training but making modification in religion is impossible and very difficult”.

A respondent is of the view that religion and spirituality both inclined to help others either in general or at workplace. As one respondent described that “Religion promote us to help others, to serve others and to guide people without any intention of return. It is our religion who guide us the best way to support others. Workplace spirituality is also a concept that has to be connected to help others in workplace”.

One of the faculty members elaborated as, “Religion is that I offer my prayer, pay Zakat and observe fast. It is also my duty that I perform my responsibilities well for which I am employed to earn legitimate livelihood (Risk-e-Halal)”.

One of the faculty members emphasizes public service in the workplace and enlightened that, “Our religion is the most beautiful code of life and the first code of life is duties towards mankind and this is called “public service” in workplace to work for the betterment of others. Workplace spirituality can be defined as work ethics and training must be conducted on work ethics on and off, the seminars must be conducted on philosophies, Karma and organize motivational lecture to promote workplace spirituality”.

A respondent delineates the spirituality of the workplace where no one is harmed, and each religion is a guide for harmony and peaceful coexistence. As “Every religion in the world emphasis on peace, harmony and peaceful coexistence. Islam also preaches and come up with the same message, so peace harmony and peaceful coexistence and living together are the basic elements which nourishes your spirit and it provides food, manure and good amount of water for you to grow and develop spiritually. While workplace spirituality is where you believe that no person is being hurt and if someone has such intentions then why not sits with the person and discuss the point of disagreement”. Another respondent extends the same view as “All the Sufi mode (Sufi philosophy) of life is to forgive all, leave the past behind, try to develop harmony, congeniality, peace with one another even at workplace. It also requires that leg pulling, patty politics, back biting does not help

you to grow spiritually. It breeds anger, resentment within you and if that is a component of your personality you will not grow, and you will not be able to reach the Maslow’s state of self-esteem and self-actualization”.

A faculty member describes spirituality in the workplace as a personal matter where religion is connection with God and finds no connection between the two. As one respondent said “Religion is your connection with GOD, but workplace spirituality is something personal and related to honesty, dedication, commitment and ownership with task. Religion doesn’t matter to do with workplace spirituality because you see other nations like Chinese and Japanese are very much professional and work hard although most of them are not religious at all”. Another respondent expands that “Religion implies a relationship with God. To be religious is to follow certain behavior suitable to live in society and related to God. We cannot ignore religion in our daily life as religion gave us guidelines and direction to spend our life. But workplace spirituality is a new term in the management derived from the concept of Spirituality. We can enhance goodness in our dealings with spirituality. Therefore, it is very possible to be spiritual without being religious”.

Many times, religion is out of discussion in workplace as one of the respondents stated that, “Religion is a much broader concept. Many times, religion is beyond our discussion. Whereas spirituality means that, how you perform your work. Workplace spirituality is performing your duties excellently. Providing quality education to students is also spirituality with reference to teaching”.

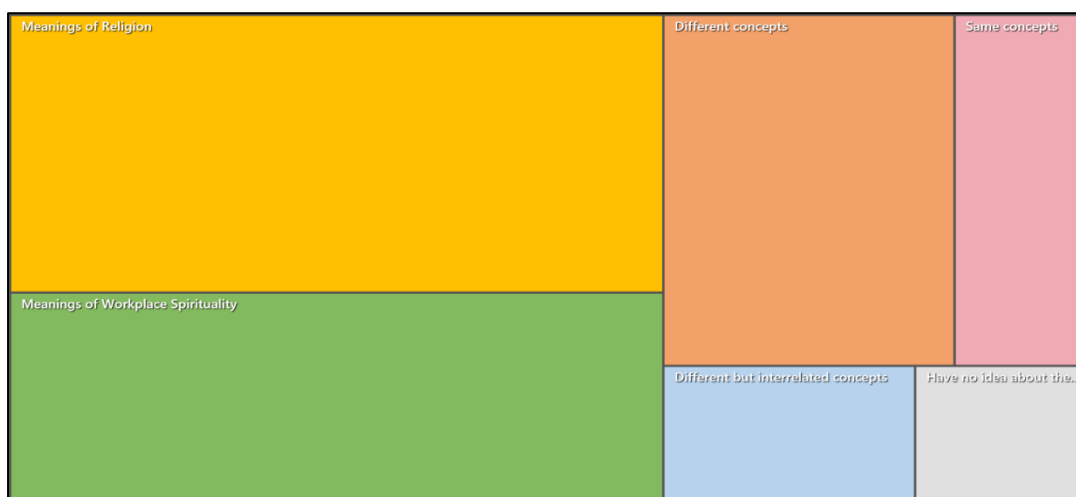


Figure 1: Nodes referenced by the respondents

4.2- Workplace and Religion are Similar Concepts

Pertaining to second research question that: Is there any difference between the workplace spirituality and religion? Some of the faculty members consider workplace spirituality and religion as similar concepts. One respondent opined that

“Workplace spirituality and religion go side by side. So, we can’t separate the both terms”. Another respondent specified that “Religion and workplace spirituality have a delicate relationship. We cannot separate the two”. One more faculty member affirmed that “Religion and spirituality both are very important and cannot be pole apart. They go side by side and can’t be separated”. One respondent is of the view that “For some people spirituality is strong belief on religion and for some persons it is a sense of responsibilities apart from religion”. Another faculty member stated that “For me workplace spirituality is a part of religion. I really think both are same. If there is a difference between the two, I think it would be hypocrisy”.

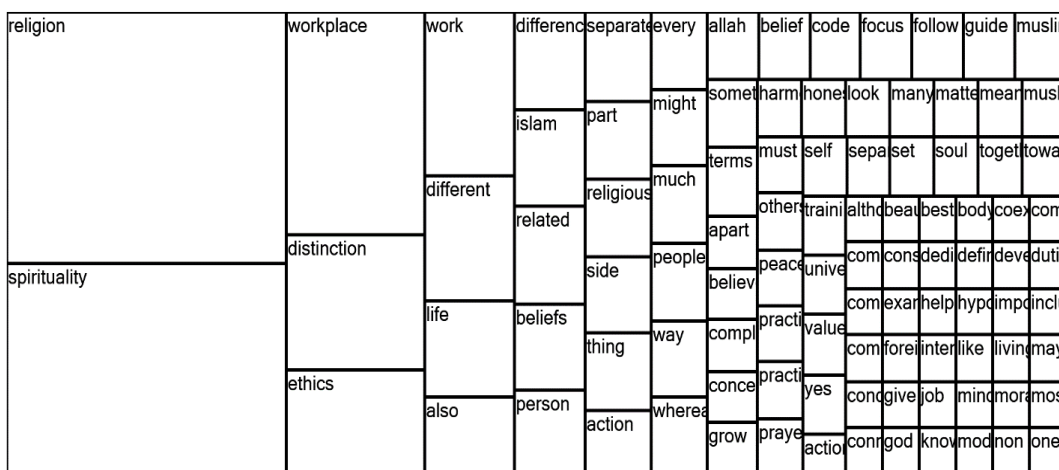


Figure 2: Tree Map for Workplace Spirituality and Religion

4.3- Workplace and Religion are Different Concept

Most of the faculty members are of the view that workplace spirituality and religion are different concepts. They stated that “I think there is a difference between religion and workplace spirituality”. Another opined that “Yes, there is difference between religion and workplace spirituality”. One respondent replied, “Religion is quite different from workplace spirituality”.

Another stated that “Workplace spirituality is a different concept it is related to soul, body and their relationship, religion is a set of belief system. They both are different to me”. Most of the respondents replied as follows: “There is a clear difference between workplace spirituality and religion. Many people think that spirituality and religion are the same. The general public often confuses the two terms; they are very different and have different implications”.

One of the respondents elaborated the difference between the concepts as:

“There is quite difference between religion and workplace spirituality”. Another participant responded, “Definitely, they both are pole apart. There’s a clear difference between religion and workplace spirituality, non-religious person can be a spiritual person”. Again alike comments were given by one respondent, “Yes, there is a distinction between spirituality and religion”.

4.4- Workplace Spirituality and Religion are different but Interlinked Concepts

Few faculty members opined that workplace spirituality and religion are different but interlinked concepts. One of the respondents replied as “One thing might lead towards other i.e. if you are religious you might produce workplace spirituality as well, both are different but dependent”. Another was of the view that “I think both are different but interlinked together”. One more respondent stated that “Both are different, but we cannot separate both the terms, they are somehow interrelated”.

4.5- Unaware of the Concept of Workplace Spirituality

Few faculty members were unaware of the concept of spirituality in the workplace and did not comment on the concept. As one respondent said, “I cannot comment a lot on it, but to me religion is a belief system and defined actions of individuals”. Another replied, “I haven’t studied it so I can’t comment on it, but religion is a complete code of life, we cannot separate it from any action”. One more opined that “They might be linked or not; no idea at all”.

Figure3: Word cloud for Workplace spirituality and Religion



5- Discussion

Referring to the research question about the meaning and concept of workplace spirituality (WPS) and religion among the academic staff of public sector universities, it is asserted that workplace spirituality is related to workplace ethics and work moralities. Many participants relate WPS with work ethics. Mostly participants found that WPS has a strong connection with people. It is something related to community integration. WPS can be modified in terms of need requirements and attained through training and workshops. A few participants believe that roots of spirituality come from religion and assumed WPS as a part of religion whereas few participants expressed that sometimes a non-religious person can be a spiritual person. Most participants perceived that workplace spirituality is something personal and related to honesty, dedication, commitment and ownership with task. It directly links with the soul and mind of a being.

In relation to the research question regarding the concept and meaning of religion in workplace, religion is defined in terms of a belief system and have a strong connection with God. Religion not only abide us to worship God, pay zakat and perform other obligations but to earn a legitimate livelihood and to earn a legitimate livelihood one has to be focus on job responsibilities. Religion is related to worshipping God and performing rituals attached to it. Religion also guides us to help and support others. Modification is not possible in religion.

Pertaining to the research question concerning the difference between the two concepts. Many respondents viewed WPS as a different concept from religion. In the extant literature, King (2007)⁶ elaborated that spirituality and religion are different concepts. However, they both have an influence on individuals' lives, behaviors and working. A few respondents stated that there is similarity between the both terms. Few respondents were unaware of the concept and some of them find WPS and religion as different but interlinked concepts confirming the extant literature. As per Hill and Pargament (2000)²⁵ spirituality and religion are characterized as related concepts rather than independent. In addition, Wuff (1997)⁵ stated that all concepts of spirituality are not linked to religion. However, these two multidimensional concepts have some common characteristics, therefore the two terms spirituality and religion can often co-occur (Hill & Pargament, 2000)²⁵.

6- Conclusion

This study has tried to provide a perspective on spirituality and religion within higher education institutions. Workplace spirituality is a new term in the field of management and people often confuse this term with religion. These two terms are independent and having its own meaning and context. However, both are interrelated to some extent. This study is based on the criterion that researchers can better investigate these two concepts that are used very frequently without clarification. Therefore, in this research a set of criteria to perceived current operational definitions of religion and spirituality has been proposed. To conclude, spirituality and religion are the set of principles and practices that cannot be separated from everyday life. They are applied at all the time and everywhere. Instead, spirituality and religion are ways of life to be sought after, practiced, nurtured and has consistency.

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