Integrating Spirituality into Psychotherapy Practice in Mental Health: Ethical Issues, Challenges and Possible Way Out

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality and Religion are known to co-exist since mankind, though in subtle form. Over time religion has become more prominent where spirituality has taken a subliminal form. However, both are known to influence our mental health to a great deal. Interest in spirituality has grown more rapidly in past few decades. From saints, this concept of spirituality has come down to mental health. People over past few decades have vigorously favoring/advocating incorporation of spirituality into healing process related with psychological issues. Though most of our clients that come to psycho-therapeutic help have religious or spiritual inclination and from the outset it appears that they would benefit when their spiritual needs /issues will be addressed by the therapist along with their clinical issue. However, existing literature does points out various ethical concerns and challenges related with incorporation of spirituality in mainframe psycho-therapeutic process.

Keywords: [Spirituality, Psychotherapy, Mental Disorders, Religion, Spiritual Integration, Ethics]

INTRODUCTION

Most of us use some medium or other to convey our desires, wishes, anxieties, fears, uncertainties etc. to some invisible figure, which we have learned to refer as God. We have our own ways of praising him or worshiping him. Over time we humans have also found out that prayer have strong healing effect during crisis situation. Logically this can be attributed to the change in one's thought process or attitude towards the crisis situation, and thus helps in healing or overcoming it. Somehow it strengthens the understanding that prayers have the power in healing, long before we get the understanding about modern days psycho-therapeutic process of healing during psychological problems. Prayers have been essentially related with the concept of religion. However, some of the early psychologist like Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, sees religion as an illusion (Uwakwe, 2020). It is also held among scholars that concepts like religion are presented to act as buffer against fierceness of nature towards mankind, for, religion usually offers explanation in terms of our past sins and act as social guiding system to discipline mankind.

Over time, religion has been overlapped with another concept i.e. spirituality. Spirituality which is supposed to exist on slightly different dimension as compared to religion is always understood as something personal with some higher meaning. On the other hand, religion is something which is

explainable, sensitive, visible and shared among a group of people. But often, it is noticed that people use these two terms interchangeably. Such practice makes it more challenging to integrating these concepts in mainframe psycho-therapeutic process. So in a nut shell a myriad of issues comes up, when there is talk of using spirituality with psychotherapy in clinical practice. This research article attempts to distinguish between these two commonly overlapped terms and tries to understand various issues, challenges and ethical concerns that come up, when we think of integrating spirituality in to mainframe therapeutic process. In the end this article tries to examine certain solutions as well, that could facilitate such integration.

Spirituality and Religion – Conceptual Understanding

An estimated about 90% of world's population is involved in some form of religious or spiritual practice (Koenig, 2009) despite all sorts of spectacular advances in science and technology across the globe. Religion and spirituality are both rooted in trying to understand the meaning of life. While religion and spirituality are similar in foundation, they are very different in practice. In contrast to the religion, spirituality is more difficult to define. Spirituality is considered more personal, something people define for themselves that is largely free of the rules, regulations and responsibilities associated with religion. There are growing number of people who categorize themselves as spiritual but not religious. Such people deny any connection at all what so ever with any religion and they understand spirituality entirely in individualistic, secular terms (Koenig, 2009). Spirituality is a globally acknowledged concept and to attempts to reach a consensus regarding its nature is somewhat difficult.

A definition of spirituality includes 'personal views and behaviors that express a sense of relatedness to the transcendental dimension or to something greater than the self. Spirituality can encompass belief in a higher being, the search for meaning, and a sense of purpose and connectedness. On the other hand, according to Moreira- Almeida et al (2006) religion is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (like God or higher power). So religion is more or less organized and practiced with-in a community. Conclusively, central to the definition of religion lies an understanding that religion is rooted in an established tradition that arises out of a group of people with common beliefs and practices related with sacred. Where-as spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to the ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship with the sacred or transcend, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of a community. The idea of religion and spirituality is like a Rectangle vs Square, meaning, with-in the paradigms of religion there exists spirituality, but if you have spirituality, it doesn't necessarily mean you have religion (or are religious). Both religion and spirituality can have a positive impact on mental health but these are essentially not inter-changeable words (Moreira- Almeida et al, 2006).

Thus, we can have an overall understanding, as *religion* and spirituality are both rooted in trying to understand the meaning of life. Though BOTH are similar in foundation, they are very different in practice. And *religion* is an organized, community-based system of beliefs, while *spirituality* resides with in the individual and what they personally believe (an element of subjectivity seen in spirituality). Based on the understanding given by Moreira- Almeida et al. (2006) that *religion* is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent, one can say that religion has an element of 'mass sharing'. On the other, *spirituality* is the personal quest for understanding

answers to the ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship with the sacred or transcend, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of a community. Thus, such understanding makes *spirituality*, a personal concept.

Integration of Spirituality in to Psychotherapy –
Mental health professionals have a very clear understanding that psycho-therapeutic process is usually carried out for emotional disorders in which the trained clinician attempts to develop a psycho-therapeutic alliance with client with the aim of alleviating existing symptom, modifying behavioral patterns and to foster positive personality growth (Wolberg, 1967). However when the client comes up to a psychologist or a psychotherapist or a counsellor for some psychological problem, he also comes with his own religious or spiritual background. Previously such religious or spiritual matters were essentially dealt by religious or spiritual leaders; however, recent research suggests that clients are increasingly expecting that psychotherapists will deal with their spiritual concerns that were traditionally addressed by religious leaders previously. This expectation has already begun to impact the practice of psychotherapy by increasing interest in the spiritually oriented psychotherapies (Sperry, 2003). This role poses certain dangers as Tan (1994), puts them as -
➢ Imposing the therapist's religious beliefs or values on the client.
➢ Failure to provide sufficient information regarding therapy to the client.
➢ Violating the therapeutic contract by focusing mainly or only on religious goals rather than therapeutic goals.
➢ Therapist may lack competence in religious/spiritual role delivery
➢ Arguing over doctrinal issues
➢ Misusing or abusing spiritual resources like prayer and the scriptures, thus

avoiding dealing with painful issues in therapy.
➢ Blurring important boundaries or parameters necessary for the therapeutic relationship to be maintained.
➢ Applying only religious interventions to problems that may require medication or other medical or psychological treatments.

It appears that, the psychotherapists might not be equipped enough or competent enough to deal with spiritual needs of the clients. Further, while doing so, it may happen that therapist may lose focus from the main psychological issue.

Challenges in Integration -
People have cautioned against incorporating spirituality while doing psychotherapy, to present, that to what extent it is realistic approach. More-so-ever it poses certain challenges. Frame and Williams (1996) presented few significant challenges in using spirituality in psychotherapy delivery. Among them are-
➢ **Religion and Spirituality as Non-scientific:** Psychology has endeavored to identify itself as a scientific enterprise. The subjective, un-quantifiable, mysterious aspects of human life (as presents in religion and spirituality) often were dismissed as non-essential distracters from the truth. Hence, therapists often are ill-prepared to address them.
➢ **Therapist's own Unresolved Religious and Spiritual Issues:** Therapist's personal per-suppositions about religious or spiritual matters and its importance may create barriers. Some therapists also view religion as authoritarian and repressive. Therapist's personal philosophy, therefore, may have a significant impact on overall therapeutic process.
➢ **Multicultural counselling focus:** Spirituality and religion should be treated as a multicultural issue. Indeed, standards for multicultural counselling competencies all include a call for practitioners to be knowledgeable about

and to use religious and spiritual healers and leaders but applications of these standards have been limited in scope. Challenges reflected a competition of values. Where the spiritual/religious match did not exist between client and therapist, psychologists reported feeling lost at times. Moreover, Unwakwe (2020) raised the issues of lack of training and experience on the part of the therapist to facilitate integration of spirituality into psychotherapy. He also cautioned that spirituality can be highly personal and it can pose a great challenge for professionals to separate their personal beliefs and practices from their professional ones

Ethical Issues In Integration -

Not only challenges occur when one tries to address clients spiritual needs during a psycho-therapeutic process but due to the very nature of the concept, various ethical issues also arises. More so, in multicultural societies where people generally have different faith belief system or follows different religion, it would be very difficult to have a uniform code of conduct, without challenging the socially shared and accepted beliefs or faith. Ricahrds and Bergin (1997) have raised few ethical issues, which includes 'Dual relationships (religious and professional)'. Meaning delivering two roles simultaneously, that of religious and professional would be quite difficult for the therapist. The therapist would be under pressure to be a neutral professional as well as develop or share client's religious inclinations. This may lead to the violation or diffusion of the professional boundaries between client and the therapist. Because therapist has to displace religious authority, has to impose religious values on clients or violate work setting (church-state) boundaries. This will lead us to Practicing outside the boundaries of professional competence. They also warn us that by doing so, the therapist is becoming enmeshed in superstition and trivializing the sacred or numinous.

However Gonsiorek (2003) talking about Ethical challenges and referring the American Psychological Association's (APA; 2003) Resolution on Religion-Based Prejudice, presented curating ethical considerations, that are embedded in such integration. These includes-

➢ *Competence:* The assumption that personal religious faith is adequate is an error. Expertise in spiritual and religious issues must also be learnable regardless of personal faith. This focus on acquired skill instead of personal experience in defining competence helps minimize "balkanization": the assumption that clients are best treated by psychotherapists who are like them.

➢ *Bias:* Negative biases toward spirituality and religion, broad range therapists' personal views on spirituality and religion serve as a basis for negative evaluation of clients' views on spirituality and religion. Overlooked negative bias variation involves ignoring or disparaging diversity within a faith tradition. Positive biases, with religious clients, can take the form of seeing such clients in a morally idealized manner, being "better." As the Resolution (APA, 2003) noted: "The right of persons to practice their religion or faith does not and cannot entail a right to harm others or to undermine the public good".

➢ **Maintaining Traditions and Standards of Psychology:** Incorporating spiritual and religious issues into psychotherapy will likely become ethically risky when deviations from psychological traditions and standards are warranted. Holding standards closer is well advised. Multiple relationships are an example these may not match professional standards, creating opportunities for misunderstanding and disappointment.

On the other hand, Simmonds (2004) Challenges the dimension for participants, regarding a greater sense of the unknown, a greater degree of uncertainty, greater responsibility for one's actions and responsibility to undertake spiritual practices in order to develop inherent

potential. This places a demand to not judge them as pathological. Thus, differentiation, between using beliefs as a part of individual psychopathology, and 'pathogenicity in belief systems' themselves may be helpful to bear in mind.

Using the American Psychological Association's (2002) RRICC Model to Highlight Ethical Issues in Spirituality and Psychotherapy Integration, Plante (2007) also highlighted certain ethical issues related with the use of spirituality in psychotherapy delivery in clinics. These includes-

- ➤ **Respect:** Need to respect the beliefs and values associated with religion and spirituality and to avoid labeling those who seek religious and spiritual growth.
- ➤ **Responsibility:** We have a responsibility to be aware and thoughtful of how religion and spiritual matters impact those with whom we work.
- ➤ **Integrity:** Integrity calls for us to be sure that we are honest and open about our skills and limitations as professionals and to avoid deception.
- ➤ **Competence:** Get adequate training to ensure providing competent professional services. Sufficient competence in spiritual and religious issues in psychology should resemble competence in other areas of expertise.
- ➤ **Concern:** Welfare of people must be paramount in our work in professional psychology, especially with those whose religious beliefs create harm to self or to others.

Incorporating spirituality in psychotherapy may induce some degree of uncertainty for the clients and it needs to be addressed with responsibility. Hence, competence of the therapist, personal bias, and maintaining standards of psychology, for example integrity, concern and respect for others become the major issues to be taken care of.

Possible Solutions That Facilitate This Integration -

The client should share the therapist's basic religious or spiritual belief system; he/she has asked for religious and spiritual input into psychotherapy and given informed consent; and there is a good reason for using a particular spiritual intervention. Spiritual direction should not completely replace psychotherapy in the therapy session. If and when the goals of psychotherapy *per se* are achieved then psychotherapy should be terminated. When a client wants only spiritual direction, a referral to a spiritual director or pastor/clergy person may be more appropriate (Tan, 2003).

Barnett and Johnson (2011) recommend the following guidelines that if followed, would be helpful in using spirituality in to mainframe therapeutic process. The main features of this guidelines are-

- ➤ Respectfully assess the client's religious or spiritual beliefs and preferences.
- ➤ Assess any connection between the presenting problem and religious or spiritual beliefs and commitments:
- ➤ Weave results of assessment into the informed consent process.
- ➤ Honestly consider the therapist's counter- transference to the client's religiousness.
- ➤ Honestly evaluate the therapist's competence in any given case.
- ➤ Consult with experts in the area of religion and psychotherapy.
- ➤ If appropriate, clinically indicated, and client gives consent, consult with client's own clergy or other religious professional.
- ➤ Take a decision about treating the client or making a referral.
- ➤ Assess outcomes and adjust plan accordingly.

When clients and psychologists were matched in terms of spiritual/religious/ atheist/agnostic background, psychologists reported fewer challenges, because the shared language and knowledge of customs helped put them at ease (Magaldi-Dopman et al. 2011)

Plante (2016) suggested spirituality and religion should be treated as a multicultural for which there should be mutual respect

and understanding. To ease out the process, Plante further argues that biases must be checked, the therapist must stay within one's own area of expertise, take help by referring to experts including clerics, being aware of best practices and evidence-based assessments and interventions, and using resources where available and last but most importantly avoid imposing his or her religious disposition on the client

Psychotherapists can learn from the experience of those who already know how to do it and also by becoming more self-aware. Writing a '*spiritual autobiography*' helps getting self-aware and avoids imposing their own values on clients (Wiggins, 2008). Be well versed in some of the basic tenets of the clients' religions. Approaching religious/spiritual clients with an openness and willingness to engage the religious/ spiritual conversation will help clients (Uwakwe, 2020)

CONCLUSION

Religion and spirituality are not interchangeable but influence each other. Nevertheless, it appears that integrating spirituality in mainframe psycho-therapeutic service delivery would hold in holistic healing. However, incorporation of spiritualism in psychotherapy is challenging and would require some major changes in established therapeutic process. These changes involve not just different types of interventions but differences in relationships, focus, and stance and Inclusion of religion & Spirituality in our therapeutic training programme. The onus is on the training institutions for developing a uniform understanding or else to devise short term courses/training programme after basic training as therapist.

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