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Summary Report

Spirituality has become a topic of considerable interest in the mental health field. Researchers and clinicians alike have begun to acknowledge the importance of the spiritual in individual's lives, and have begun to incorporate this dimension into their conceptualization of the human condition. Unfortunately, the spiritual assessment tools currently available exhibit distinct cultural biases and shortcomings in their approach to spirituality. The available instruments attempt to assess spirituality in an entirely linear fashion. A person is judged to be more or less spiritual based on his/her report of certain behaviors and beliefs. Since authors dictate which behaviors and beliefs are considered spiritual, this presents a significant obstacle to the cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural usefulness of these measures. Furthermore, most available instruments approach spirituality from a distinctly Western, Judeo/Christian perspective. Questions refer to God, prayer, afterlife, and other constructs which are not present in all religions and cultures. It is also unfortunate that the vast majority of available instruments were normed on very homogeneous samples. The usefulness and efficacy of measures based on white, Christian samples is questionable when applied to culturally and religiously diverse populations.

With an eye toward overcoming the aforementioned obstacles above, the goal of my research is ultimately to create a simple, paper-and-pencil measure of spirituality from a constructive developmental perspective. Constructivism proposes that individuals actively participate in making meaning out of their environments. Coupled with developmentalism, the theory holds that individuals make qualitative shifts in their meaning-making processes throughout the lifespan. Applied to the topic of spirituality, this perspective would suggest that the individual uses his/her way of knowing to construct spiritual meaning based on his/her experiences and cultural context. It is hoped that the application of this theoretical perspective to the construct of spirituality will be a step toward overcoming the cultural and religious biases that exist in the current literature and assessment tools in the area of spirituality and mental health. Instead of attempting to quantify the specific beliefs and behaviors that make an individual "spiritual", spirituality is conceptualized as the evolving process of how one comes to understand ultimate questions. A developmental assessment can identify qualitative differences in approaching spiritual issues, even within a given cultural or religious group. It also has the potential to identify cross-cultural similarities in how individuals understand their spiritual experience.

The process of creating an assessment instrument such as the one described above must first begin with qualitative research. Gathering qualitative data from a diverse pool of individuals provides a base from which to extract themes and commonalities for questionnaire items. It is necessary to gather both structural information (the complexity with which an individual constructs his/her meaning), and content information (what s/he believes, how s/he practices, what language s/he uses). Furthermore, such information

must be collected from individuals with a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds, and a wide range of developmental complexity.

The most widely accepted means of gathering qualitative data from a constructive-developmental perspective is by use of Kegan's Subject-Object Interview. The process of becoming trained to administer and score this interview is quite involved and time-consuming, but the support of the Center allowed me to complete this training over the summer. After being trained in this methodology, I was able to develop a specialized protocol that focuses on structure and complexity in matters of faith and spirituality. Several pilot interviews were conducted using this new protocol, with promising results. The adapted interview seems to provide enough structural information to be coded using Kegan's Subject-Object method, while still revealing rich content data regarding spiritual beliefs and practices.

Another crucial factor in the success of this project is my ability to recruit a sample that is as religiously and culturally diverse as I had hoped. This proved to be a greater obstacle than was originally anticipated, but also provided some valuable learning experiences. This summer provided an excellent opportunity for me to build relationships in the community with local religious leaders. As the result of building connections through numerous phone calls, emails, and face-to-face meetings, I was able to obtain cooperation from six local places of worship. These include a predominantly African-American Pentacostal Christian church, a Methodist church, a Jewish temple, a Hindu temple, a Buddhist organization and an Islamic center. This represents a significant step towards obtaining a diverse perspective on spirituality, such as has not been previously presented in the mental health literature.

It will now be possible to move ahead with obtaining interview data from individuals in each of the above-mentioned organizations. Six individuals from each location will be randomly selected to complete an interview. Interview will be transcribed, scored using the Subject-Object scoring procedure, and analyzed for common themes at each developmental level. From these analyses, items will be constructed for the new Spiritual Development Index. The newly-created measure will then be administered to a larger group of participants, drawn from the Vanderbilt community and from our cooperating religious institutions. The resulting quantitative data will be analyzed to determine the validity and reliability of the new assessment instrument.

The results of the current research will ultimately become the basis for my Masters' Thesis, in partial completion of my degree program. It is hoped that the resulting manuscript may also be published in a refereed psychology or counseling academic journal. Based on the work already completed, a session based on my CSRC-sponsored research has been accepted for presentation at the 2006 American Counseling Association's Annual Conference.