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The Influence of Workplace Spirituality on Work Stress in University Employees
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Abstract

Throughout the 21st century, change has been a predominant theme in the workplace. Increased technology and globalization are two key contributors to the changing landscape. Higher education workforces are grappling with the growing problem of work stress and prior research suggests that it requires a new approach. Spirituality has a longstanding history of being excluded from the workplace, yet recent investigations of workplace stress that fail to incorporate spirituality as a factor are now met with criticism. The primary purpose of this study is to explore the dimensions of workplace spirituality - inner life, meaningful work and community and connectedness – in the management of work stress in university employees. This study utilizes a mixed method approach to explore the experiences, attitudes and practices of university employees that reveal associations between workplace spirituality and work stress.

Introduction

The problem of work stress is spreading through the academy (Gillespie et al., 2001; Wild et al. 2003; Katsapis 2012). Research shows that spiritual development is one way to handle stressful situations at work (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Stanley, 2011). Research on spirituality in the workplace in higher education has largely been exploratory and unrelated to the problems of stress in the academy (Bradley & Kauanui, 2003; Khasawneh 2011). Studies that have examined spirituality in the workplace and work stress have primarily been conducted in the business sector (Kumar & Kumar, 2014; Daniel, 2015). The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore workplace spirituality as a coping mechanism for reducing occupational stress among university employees.

Problem and Purpose

Higher education administrators have been fund to face significant challenges associated with work stress. Blix and Lee (1991) conducted a quantitative study of perceived stress in university administrators with deans, associate deans and chairpersons (n=575) and found that the demand on these administrators' time was associated with high levels of stress. Katsapis (2012) determined that role overload was the prevalent source of high stress among university research administrators. Mark and Smith (2012) compared 307 university employees with 120 employees from the general population in a

study of work stress. They found significantly higher levels of anxiety, job demands and reports of stress-related illness in university employees, and recommended a paradigm shift in the employee support and care provided by colleges and universities.

There is increasing evidence that a major transformation is occurring in many organizations (Marques, 2008; Karkas, 2010). There is a resurgence of interest in spirituality. Workplace spirituality has been summarized 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). Cunningham (2014) emphatically noted that the limited number of studies that have considered spirituality in examinations of work stress constitutes a major oversight. In an empirical study, Daniel (2015) concluded that meaningful work was associated with the experience of less stress. In their study of work stress with deans, Blix and Lee (1991) found that social support, which is akin to community and connectedness in the workplace, was positively correlated with perceived ability to cope with work stress.

Theoretical Framework

The Revised Model of Stress and Coping (RMSC) introduced by S. Folkman (1997) and the Spiritual Framework for Coping (SFC) developed by Gall et al. (2005) provide the theoretical framework for this study. The RMSC delineates three coping strategies: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and meaning-focused coping. Folkman's (2008) model suggests that when problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping fail to resolve the stressful situation, meaning-focused coping is initiated. Meaning-focused coping, also referred to as meaning-making, is a process in which individuals use their beliefs to derive meaning from a situation and view it in a larger context. Gall et al.'s (2005) SFC extended Folkman's revised transactional stress theory to include spirituality as a distinct type of meaning-focused coping that could be used to reduce stress.

Methods

The current study employs a convergent, mixed methods design (Creswell, 2013). Collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data will allow for triangulation of the data which may provide deeper insight (Merriam, 2009) into the process that occurs when workplace spirituality is available and used to mitigate the stress of university employees. The qualitative approach in this study, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, explores university employees' experiences of workplace spirituality including participation in campus meditation or yoga groups and how this influences work stress levels. Following transcription, apriori codes will be used to code the data. The quantitative approach is designed to determine whether or not engagement in workplace spirituality is significantly associated with lower levels of stress in university employees. Two types of non-probabilistic sampling (e.g., convenience and snowball sampling) will support recruitment of survey respondents. The quantitative aspect of the study incorporates 34 items from Part 1 of Ashmos and

Duchon's (2000) Spirituality at Work instrument, its goal to measure the individual construct of workplace spirituality; and the eight-item Stress in General scale (SIG) (Bowling Green State University, 2009) to measure work stress.

Summary

The purpose of this research study is to correlate the effect of workplace spirituality with work stress in university employees. The framework for this examination is the result of an extensive review of empirical studies and scholarly literature reviews. The use of a convergent mixed-methods study design will support a robust exploration of the two subjective constructs. Gaining knowledge about how university employees manage work stress is significant to supporting and caring for this population. Recognition of workplace spirituality as a factor in managing work stress can offer critical insight to organizations seeking to support and develop university employees.

Author Biography

Melinda Johnson holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Stanford University and a Master of Science in higher education from Drexel University. She is the director of administrative operations at the Institute for Women's Health and Leadership, within Drexel's College of Medicine. Melinda's career and training in higher education have focused on human resources and financial resources. Her research examines the association between spirituality in the workplace and work stress.

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