Workplace Spirituality among Malaysian Community Service Employees in the Public Sector

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Abstract

Despite the number of individuals who engage in pursuits for spirituality in their daily lives, there is still lack of studies examining spirituality in the workplace especially in the public sector. This study explored the experience of spirituality at the workplace among community service employees in a public sector organization. The dimensions of spirituality studied include meaningful work, sense of community and alignment of individual values with organizational values. Survey data from 180 community service employees revealed that overall the employees experienced a reasonably high level of spirituality, and employees experienced meaningfulness of work more as compared to the sense of community, and alignment of values. The results imply that the community service organization studied serves as a favorable environment that fosters the experience of spirituality among its employees. Though limited by the monosectoral nature of this investigation and the Eastern context, future researchers are encouraged to compare employees' experiences in workplace spirituality in both the public and private service sectors as well as in both the Eastern and Western contexts.

Keywords: workplace spirituality, community service, public sector, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Assessing spirituality at the workplace is a relatively new focus of research, and in the past decade or so there has been a growing interest in spirituality at the workplace among researchers (Ahmad & Omar, 2015; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Duchon & Ashmos, 2005; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009). There is an attempt among organizations to reject viewing workers as rational and mechanistic beings and to increase the realization that employees can be motivated beyond the emphasis on rationality or self-interest (Hicks, 2003). In other words, organizations have begun to appreciate their inherent link with spirituality and employees are looking inward in pursuit of inner peace as well as a desire to obtain more than a big salary from work. Additionally, there is the realization among academics and practitioners that promoting spirituality at the workplace can enhance performance of employees (James, Miles, & Mullins, 2011). There were also researchers who asserted that beyond improved performance, workplace spirituality could help in improvement of employee productivity and contribution to the organization, employee problem solving and intuitive capacities, and organizational efficiency of human resources utilization (Weitz, Vardi, & Setter, 2012). Spirituality may also assist employees in controlling their behaviors at the workplace (James, Miles, & Mullins, 2011). According to Ahmad and Omar (2015), the experience of spirituality at work has the potential to improve work engagement and there is a greater likelihood that employees will display organizational citizenship behavior.

Generally, scholars associate spirituality with a pursuit for meaning in life (Debats, 1999). In the workplace, employees experiencing high spirituality find their work more fulfilling while employees experiencing low spirituality tend to manifest themselves in a number of work problems such as low morale and high turnover (Petchsawanga & Duchon, 2009). Workplace spirituality refers to "the recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in a community" (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000, p. 137). As noted by Gupta et al. (2013), togetherness and connectedness with colleagues at work is an important element in the experience of spirituality. Three dimensions of workplace spirituality have been identified and measured in a study by Milliman et al. (2003). These dimensions include at the individual level,

meaningfulness of work, at the group level, sense of community, and at the organizational level, alignment with organizational values.

Because of the frequent confusion between the terms spirituality and religion, and the lack of understanding of the difference between the two constructs, workplace spirituality has been mostly omitted from empirical investigations. Despite the close relationship between spirituality and religion, they are different since one can be spiritual without practicing religious rituals, or in other words, the expression of spirituality can be in religious or non-religious forms (Canda, 2008). As a related yet distinct construct, spirituality is not connected to any specific religious belief, and it is not synonymous with religiosity (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Religion includes beliefs and practices of individuals belonging to an organized group, while spirituality involves feelings and experiences connected to the search for meaning as well as purpose in life (Henningsgaard & Arnau, 2008). Although they may frequently co-occur or not mutually exclusive (Hicks, 2002), spirituality denotes a more individualized phenomenon that is distinctive from formal organized religion. Spirituality at work deals with souls of individuals that need to be nourished at work, and individuals who experience a sense of meaning and purpose in work, and a sense of community or connectedness to others at the workplace (Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Harrington et al., 2001; Milliman et al., 2003). As an individualized phenomenon, an employee seeks for not only meaningful work, but aims to become a whole person with a sense of connectedness between his/her true self and other individuals at the workplace, as well as to the transcendent (Hudson, 2014).

Despite the increase in the number of investigations on beliefs and values including workplace spirituality for the past decade or so, there is lack of effort to empirically examine employees' experiences of workplace spirituality in the government service sector organizations (Houston & Cartwright, 2007), especially in the Eastern context. Although Bruce (2000), van der Wal et al. (2008), and Houston and Cartwright (2007), for example, have included employees in the government service sector organizations in their research, there is still a need for further empirical investigation in this sector since employees have different experiences in different roles and different organizational contexts as emphasized by the framework of organizational culture, multiple needs, and meaningful work whereby the culture of an organizational could influence its employees' experience of "meaningful tasks, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to further meaningful goals and values" (Cardador & Rupp, 2011, p. 158). This study aimed to explore employees' experiences of spirituality in a community service organization in the Malaysian public sector.

1.1 Workplace Spirituality

Workplace spirituality has been defined as "a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that brings feelings of completeness and joy" (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 13). This definition emphasizes on work values and sense of connectedness. Another definition by Adams and Csiernik (2002) is – "workplace spirituality involves positively sharing, valuing, caring, respecting, acknowledging and connecting the talents and energies of people in a meaningful goal-directed behavior that enables them to belong, be creative, be personally fulfilled and take ownership in their combined destiny" (p. 43). According to Marques (2005) workplace spirituality is "an experience of interconnectedness and trust among those involved in a work process, engendered by individual goodwill, leading to the collective creation of a motivational organizational culture, epitomized by reciprocity and solidarity, and resulting in enhanced overall performance, which is ultimately translated in lasting organizational excellence" (p. 283). Even though workplace spirituality have been defined in various ways, researchers have not come to an agreement on an appropriate definition. However, a review of definitions revealed that the main dimensions of most definitions were meaningfulness, purpose and connectedness (Duchon & Plowman, 2005). Besides these dimensions, Milliman et al. (2003) identified another dimension, alignment of values. In this study we focus on the following three dimensions identified by Milliman et al. (2003) namely, meaningfulness of work, sense of community or connectedness, and alignment of individual and organizational values.

1.2 Meaningful Work

An essential aspect of workplace spirituality involves the search for deeper sense of meaning as well as purpose in work, living one's dream, and expressing inner life needs through meaningfulness in work, and contribution to others (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). The expression of workplace spirituality involves the underlying assumptions that an individual has his/her own desires and inner motivations to be involved in tasks that give meaning to his/her life as well as the lives of others (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). "People experienced meaningfulness when they felt worthwhile, useful, and valuable – as though they made a difference and were not taken for granted" (Kahn, 1990, pp. 703-704). The spirituality view is that an individual looks for meaning and purpose in work,

besides a paycheck (Hudson, 2014). Although making money is important, for most people it is not the most vital goal (Mitroff, 2003). Work is not only meant to be stimulating or challenging, but work is viewed as a vocation, and a calling, a means to create deeper meaning and identity at work (Duchon & Ashmos, 2005).

1.3 Sense of Community

A critical dimension of spirituality at work which occurs at the group level is sense of community. It involves having a deep relationship with others, or concerns connectedness between employees and their colleagues at work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). The employee feels that he/she is part of the greater community at work, yet interdependent (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Sense of community involves the belief that people view themselves as connected to one another and that ones' inner self is connected to the inner self of others (Miller, 1992). This relationship or interconnectedness fosters positive feelings (Jurkiewicz & Giacalone (2004). According to Neal and Bennett (2000), employees working in teams or community are mentally, emotionally and spiritually connected. The essence of this community is that there is a deep sense of connectedness among employees, including freedom of expression, support, and genuine caring (Munda, 2015). Individuals at work experience sense of community when the work environment has characteristics, such as sense of belonging, support, tension reduction, shared faith, common values, and empowerment (Naylor, 1996).

1.4 Alignment of Values

The third component of spirituality includes the interaction of individuals with the larger organizational mission and purpose (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). This component of spirituality involves a match between individuals' personal values and beliefs and the organization's mission and purpose (Milliman et al., 2003). Alignment of values involves the belief that organizations have appropriate values and a strong conscience, and they are very much concerned about their employees' welfare (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). The alignment of employees and organizational values implies the significance of value-driven organizations whereby values which are important to the organization are espoused and employees support and identify with those values (Saks, 2011). It has been noted by Pfeffer that value-based and value-driven organizations are "better able to engage the hearts and the minds of their people" (p. 27).

2. Method

2.1 Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 180 workers in a public sector organization in Malaysia. The employees were from a government community service organization. We only selected employees who had served the organizations for at least three years, since we anticipated that during this minimum period the employees had experienced spirituality at work in some way. We obtained permission from the organization to conduct the survey using self-administered questionnaires which were distributed and later collected.

2.2 Measurement

We measured workplace spirituality using 21 items from the Spirituality at Work (SAW) scale by Milliman et al. (2003). Meaningful work, measured by six items, sense of community by seven items, and alignment of employee and organizational values by eight items are the three dimensions of the scale. For meaningful work, a sample item is "My work is connected to what I think is important in life", for sense of community, "I believe employees genuinely care about each other", and for alignment of values, "My organization is concerned about health of employees". Using response options ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), the employees indicated their agreement levels with respect to the statements.

2.3 Analysis of Data

Table 1. Reliability of subscales and overall scale

Subscale/overall scale	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Meaningful work	6	.93
Sense of community	7	.94
Alignment of values	8	.93
Overall workplace spirituality	21	.97

We determine the reliability of each subscale (dimension) and the overall measuring scale by computing the

Cronbach alpha coefficients. The values of the Cronbach alpha coefficient for each subscale and the overall workplace spirituality were more than the acceptable value of .70 (Nunally, 1978) as shown in Table 1. Means and standard deviations were computed to describe the study sample and variables. Paired sample t-test was used to examine the pairwise differences between the means of the workplace spirituality dimensions.

3. Results

The respondents' demographic characteristics are shown in Table 2. A total of 180 employees participated in this study, and 35.6% were males while 64.4% were females. They were predominantly (71.6%) younger employees aged below 40. Nearly half (47.1%) of the respondents had tertiary education and slightly more than half (52.8%) had high school education. A big proportion (47.8%) of the respondents were field assistants or supervisors, a small proportion (13.9%) executives or administrators, and the rest (38.3%) support staff.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 180)

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	64	35.6
	Female	116	64.4
Age	< 30	33	18.3
	30 - 39	96	53.3
	40 - 49	30	16.7
	≥ 50	21	11.7
Education level	High school	95	52.8
	Bacelor/Diploma	79	43.9
	Masters	6	3.3
Job category	Field Assistant/Supervisor	86	47.8
	Executive/Administrator	25	13.9
	Support staff	69	38.3

Meaningful work, the basic key element which involves the search for deeper sense of meaning as well as purpose in work, had the highest mean (Table 3). This is followed by the sense of community which represents the belief that people view themselves as connected to one another and that ones' inner self is connected to the inner self of others. The alignment of values dimension which involves a match between individuals' personal values and beliefs, and the organization's mission and purpose had the lowest mean. Our results are in line with the study conducted by Milliman et al. (2003) and we have used the dimensions of workplace spirituality used in their study. However, it must be acknowledged that a bigger proportion (70%) of Milliman et al.'s sample was from the for-profit organizations and 30% from non-profits in the United States. Similar results on meaningful work, the dimension with the highest mean, were found by Rego and Cunha (2007) in their study on employees from various organizations in Portugal.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of spirituality dimensions and overall spirituality

Variable	M	SD
Meaningful work	5.83	.84
Sense of community	5.56	.93
Alignment of values	5.43	.81
Overall workplace spirituality	5.61	.86

The means and standard deviations of items measuring spirituality dimensions and overall spirituality are presented in Table 4. All the item means were above five (on a seven-point scale). The most highly endorsed item was "I see a connection between work and social good" ($M = 5.94$, $SD = .91$). The item that was least endorsed was "I look forward to coming to work" ($M = 5.67$, $SD = .84$).

Overall, the employees in this study seem to experience a reasonably high sense of community as a reflection of the extent to which employees view themselves as connected to one another. The item "In my organization, working cooperatively with others is valued" ($M = 5.87$, $SD = .81$) had the highest mean. The item with the lowest mean was "I feel free to express opinions" ($M = 5.26$, $SD = .73$).

For the alignment of values, we found that the most highly endorsed item was "My organization is concerned about the poor" ($M = 5.90$, $SD = .87$). The item that was least endorsed was "My organization cares about whether my spirit is energized or not" ($M = 5.08$, $SD = .66$).

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of items measuring workplace spirituality

Spirituality dimension/Item	M	SD
Meaningful work		
I experience joy in work.	5.80	.82
My spirit is energized by work.	5.76	1.18
My work is connected to what I think is important in life.	5.86	.93
I look forward to coming to work.	5.67	.84
I see a connection between work and social good.	5.94	.91
I understand what gives my work personal meaning.	5.92	.93
Sense of community		
In my organization, working cooperatively with others is valued.	5.87	.81
I feel part of a community at work.	5.79	1.03
I believe people support each other at work.	5.71	.80
I feel free to express opinions.	5.26	.73
I think employees are linked with a common purpose.	5.45	.80
I believe employees genuinely care about each other.	5.33	.95
I feel there is a sense of being a part of a family at work.	5.43	.87
Alignment of values		
I feel positive about the values of the organization.	5.63	.64
My organization is concerned about the poor.	5.90	.87
My organization cares about all its employees.	5.26	.89
My organization has moral values.	5.50	.85
I feel connected with the organization's goals.	5.51	.93
My organization is concerned about health of employees.	5.18	.96
I feel connected with the mission of the organization.	5.55	.74
My organization cares about whether my spirit is energized or not.	5.08	.66

Table 5. Results of t-test for pairwise differences in workplace spirituality dimension means

Pair	Dimension	Mean	SD	t	p
Pair 1	Meaningful work	5.83	.84	5.17	.000
	Sense of community	5.56	.93		
Pair 2	Meaningful work	5.83	.84	6.48	.000
	Alignment of values	5.43	.81		
Pair 3	Sense of community	5.56	.93	3.51	.001
	Alignment of values	5.43	.81		

Table 5 shows the results of the pairwise comparisons in employees' experience of the three dimensions of workplace spirituality. The experience of meaningful work was significantly greater than that of sense of community (t = 5.17, p < .001) and alignment of values (t = 6.48), t < .001), and the experience of sense of community was significantly greater than that of alignment of values (t = 3.51, p < .001).

4. Discussion

In terms of meaningful work we discovered that the employees in this study found their work greatly meaningful since the role of the organization is to serve the public interest by responding to their needs, and the goal is to serve especially the poor, disabled, the dependent young and elderly, as well as vulnerable groups. The field staff, particularly, and the administrative and support staff are more likely to have satisfying experiences serving their clients. This is essentially so when the employees believe that the clients or community served have benefitted from the service provided and the employees realize the connection between the performed tasks and the social good they bring to the community and thus gives their work personal meaning, and they derived satisfaction and joy from work. Hence, it is not surprising that the meaningful work dimension of spirituality was more highly endorsed by employees as compared to the other two dimensions namely, sense of community and alignment of values.

Another likely reason for the relatively high score for the experience of meaningful work could be that in a public service organization, spirituality is viewed as one frame through which government employees find meaning in their work (Lowery, 2005). Additionally, a study by Tummers and Knies (2013) has shown that the public organization leaders tend to play an important role in trying to make work more meaningful for employees and this may probably be a contributing factor for the meaningful work experienced by employees. Our results seem not to be in line with those of van der Wal et al. (2008) whereby "self-fulfillment' as a value closely related to meaningful work is less perceived as crucial by managers in public sector organizations.

For the sense of community dimension, we intend to know whether an employee experiences a deep sense of relationship with their colleagues and feels part of the greater group at work. Also, we are interested in knowing whether the employee is able to identify him/herself with the shared purpose of the group. Our results show that the employees have a reasonably high sense of community. However, contrary to expectation, in the public sector organizations studied by van der Wal et al. (2008), 'serviceability' and 'responsiveness' are less considered by managerial staff as crucial. The researchers acknowledged that the results might have been different if they had surveyed public servants who were in direct customer contact, instead of managers as decision making overseers. The results of this present study may be explained in terms of the composition of its sample whereby about half (47.8%) of the sample consisted of government servants as community service workers who are more in direct contact with clients. It can be expected that such employees tend to be more citizen-friendly and socially responsive. Generally community service workers tend to be more people-oriented and hence there is a tendency that they can relate to others at work better than those whose core business is administration or support service whereby they are not directly in contact with clients.

For alignment of values, we are keen to know whether an employee's personal beliefs and values match the organization's mission and purpose. The results show that in this public service organization there seems to be a substantial match of employee and organizational values. With the moral values that the organization has including concern for societal needs and for its employees, and sense of contribution to community wellbeing, the employees seem to have favorable attitude toward such values and they feel connected to their organization's goals.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the public service employees experienced reasonably high levels of spirituality at work. Practically, this exploratory investigation serves as an initial effort towards understanding the spiritual experience of public service employees involved in community service. The results imply that the community service organization studied, in the Eastern context, serves as a favorable environment that fosters the experience of spirituality among its employees. Theoretically, the results add to the literature on workplce spirituality specifically in a community servic organization culture and to a certain extent fulfill the need for such a study since the framework of organizational culture, multiple needs, and meaningful work posited that the culture of an organizational could influence its employees' experience of "meaningful tasks, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to further meaningful goals and values" (Cardador & Rupp, 2011, p. 158).

There are some limitations in this present study. The results may lend itself vulnerable to problems of response bias with the use of self-report data. However, since workplace spirituality relates to individual experience in this study, self-report can be regarded as an acceptable means for examining the construct. Additionally, external

validity of the results obtained from the study sample is another limitation since our sample includes employees from only one public service organization. Therefore, the results may not be generalized to employees in other public as well as private service organizations. It would therefore have been more desirable to conduct studies using data from other public service organizations to establish the generalizability of the findings to the public sector. Though limited by the monosectoral nature of this investigation and its Eastern context, future researchers are encouraged to examine if there is any difference in employees' experiences of workplace spirituality in both the public and private service sectors to further examine whether the organizational context may influence the results.

Cross-cultural generalizations are additionally limited by the fact that in this study the data were gathered from employees in a public service organization in Malaysia, a country where the people have been viewed as having strong religious traditions in life, including work (Abdullah, 2001). The participants may be more likely to be conscious of the spiritual dimension of work. There is therefore a necessity to compare employees' experiences of spirituality in both the Eastern and Western workplace, before generalizations can be established.

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