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Coming out of the closet: negotiating spiritual expression in the workplace

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Abstract *Current spirit at work literature often assumes spirituality needs to be introduced to the workplace. This paper offers an additional perspective, arguing that spirituality is already present, as many individuals have spiritual beliefs but struggle to articulate or enact these beliefs at work. Exploratory narrative research revealed frequent references to a lack of safety in expressing spirituality at work. The question is why and how do individuals silence their spiritual expression. This paper explores this question and presents a model that captures the ongoing experiential nature of spirituality and proposes that decisions about spiritual expression in the workplace are complex meshes of stimulus, decision-making and action cycles (SDAs) that are embedded in the individual's sensemaking, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. Findings are explained through different theoretical lenses such as diversity management, social identity theory, social penetration theory and affective sensemaking theory.*

Introduction

In the current spirit at work it is often assumed that spirituality needs to be introduced to the workplace, yet an analysis of a collection of narratives on the influence of spirituality on career behavior revealed frequent references to a lack of safety in expressing spirituality in workplace settings. Words and phrases such as "being in the closet"; "hiding"; "safety" and "the risk of being different" were repeatedly used suggesting the issue is not one of introducing spirituality into the workplace but of understanding why spirituality is not always expressed in the workplace.

The starting point for this paper is therefore the assumption that spirituality is already present because many individuals within organizations report having spiritual beliefs, which are an integral part of who they are, whether at work or elsewhere. Using a set of illustrative workers' narratives this paper explores the question of how workers decide whether to express their spirituality at work.

The extant research on diversity in the workplace is concerned with the conditions necessary in order to create safe, equitable and welcoming work environments. Judgmental and divisive reactions to visible social identities such as race, gender or age have been extensively documented as factors that work against the creation of such an environment. Far less has been documented about reactions to visible religious identity and invisible spiritual beliefs. This invisibility and the concomitant lack of reaction poses challenges as the individual has to make the choice to give voice to or silence his/her

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spiritual social identity in the face of very limited evidence as to how spiritually based communication and behavior will be interpreted and responded to.

In this paper we draw on diversity literature, as well as sensemaking, relationship development and social identity theories to analyze narratives that reveal individuals' decisions regarding the expression of spirituality in the workplace. In particular, we are concerned with the dimensions that contribute to workers' decisions to silence or express their spirituality. In so doing we suggest a conceptual framework for considering the process of spiritual expression that could provide the basis for further theoretical development as well as alert individuals and organizations to the factors that appear to be implicated in the silencing of spirituality.

Risks associated with expressing religious and spiritual identity in a secular organization

Religion- and spirituality-based bias is an emerging issue (Bennett, 2001), however little research has been done on the topic. Extant research has primarily focussed on visible religious expressions. A recent US survey by the Tannenbaum Centre[1] found 20 per cent of the surveyed population from the US reported having been a victim of religious bias such as not being allowed to take time off to observe particular holidays or for prayer time or being afraid to ask for time off work to observe these. Workers reported being told not to wear any type of beard or facial hair even when these were worn for religious reasons. And employees who wear clothing that expresses their particular faith were said to be told there may be negative implications for promotion or were made fun of by other employees. While many of these perceived biases and actual experiences were reported by members of minority religions, there was an overall perception, including those of the Christian majority group, that there was a general bias against the expression of religious beliefs in the workplace.

Beyond immediate visible religious expressions, and the blatant documented consequences of these for the employee, there is an overall perception that spirituality is a risky topic to raise and discuss within an organizational setting and that individuals self-censure their spiritual values, beliefs and attitudes:

> Many workers desire opportunities for spiritual expression in the workplace but are hesitant because of fears of offending peers and management (Lewis and Geroy, 2000, p. 683).

> . . . the result of an intense compound of traditions and attitudes makes spirituality almost undiscussable in grouping where the various belief systems of members are unknown. It feels risky, awkward, and the point of doing it is always in question (Vaill, 1991, p. 11).

Mitroff and Denton (1999) found that most people wished ardently that they could express their spirituality in the workplace. But at the same time, most were extremely hesitant to do so because they had strong fears and doubts that they could do so without offending their peers.

At this point it may be useful to make a distinction between religious and spiritual practice. In relation to work and organizations, religion is usually

connoted with prescribed practices such as prayer, specific dress codes or observance of holy days. Spirituality is connoted with daily personal integration and applications of deeply held values such as humility, integrity or service (Conger, 1994; Harlos, 2000; Milliman *et al.*, 1999). In making this distinction we would not like to imply that those belonging to a religion are not concerned with daily applications of values, or that those who do not have a spiritual belief do not have deeply held values. We simply want to indicate a distinction between (prescribed) religious practice and spiritual values, and indicate that the narratives drawn on in this paper come from a study that incorporates both. As such this paper extends the discussion beyond religious bias to include the expression of spiritual values outside the designated religious frameworks.

Identity is socially constructed, meaning it is discovered and expressed through exchanges with others. Expression of one's spirituality, including religious expression, is inextricably associated with this negotiation of identity. There are potentially negative consequences associated with the expression of spirituality, particularly in secular workplaces, despite spirituality's centrality to the lives of many employees. From diversity literature we can deduce a variety of individual and organizational consequences of expressing marginalized aspects of one's true and whole identity in the workplace.

The diversity literature recognizes that there are risks for individuals and organizations who form allegiances with marginalized social identity groups. One risk for example is that an individual or organization's professionalism might be brought into question. However there are recognized potential gains to be made by both employees and the organizations they work for when diversity is embraced in the workplace, particularly when this allows people to bring their whole selves to work. Creed and Scully (2000, p. 392) suggest that:

> Making social identities fully social is significant for employees as it enables them to move beyond the life of the classic, impersonal incumbent of a role and bring their whole self to work .

Within gay and lesbian literature the expression of identity is not only related to bringing the whole self to work but also to social changes that may reduce the stigma and costs of a particular social identity such as being gay (Creed and Scully, 2000). In other words creating a safe environment is being brought about by marginalized individuals taking the risk to express their identity. Women and identity literature also addresses how women can challenge, neutralize and modify social imperatives that restrict the enactment of their identities and live more meaningfully through heightened identity awareness and expression (Hall, 1990). While some diversity literature is concerned with social change and individual well-being, diversity is typically discussed in terms of benefits to the organization. These include functional diversity benefits such as drawing on different perspectives to enhance decision quality, innovation, renewal and creativity as well as benefits of social category diversity such as tapping into a wider pool of qualified and able individuals

(Schneider and Northcraft, 1999). Literature and research advocating managing religious diversity in the workplace makes claims to both functional and social category benefits (Bennett, 2001). Much of the discourse on spirituality in the workplace is trying to address a sense that:

> Separation from other people, alienation from their work, and lack of meaning in their lives . . . leaves one feeling dry, unfulfilled and unhappy, and is often experienced as a profound absence or vacuum in one's life (Cavanagh, 1999, p. 186).

It is suggested that when individuals bring their spirituality to the workplace they feel less alienated from work, self and others and therefore more whole. Additional potential benefits of expression of integrating spirituality and work are identified, such as increased creativity and intuition (Biberman and Whittey, 1997; Neck and Milliman, 1994); improved ethical behavior (Fort, 1995); increased empowerment and concern with the environment (Lee, 1991); more and better leadership (Conger, 1994; Nevard, 1991); stronger more cohesive vision and purpose (Kahnweiler and Otte, 1997) and enhanced team and community building (Hawley, 1993; Henson, 1991; Biberman and Whittey, 1997).

This literature supports the thesis that there are potential individual, organizational and social advantages to spirituality being expressed in organizations. However individuals are at the same time self-censuring spiritual expression. For this reason we suggest it is important for organizations and individuals to understand the process of decision-making in relation to spiritual expression.

Research design

Methodology

A combination of narrative and collaborative inquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981) were used. A narrative inquiry was viewed to be appropriate as "a life narrative brings to the fore a frame through which purpose and direction in a person's life can be made visible" (Hydén, 1995, p. 69) and "shows the unity and purpose of a human life" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 219). This was considered to be desirable in a study of spirituality.

One strength of collaborative inquiry is that research is done "with" rather than "on" individuals (Heron, 1992). It involves the research participants themselves in the analysis of the data, thus ensuring that the interpretations of the data by the researcher are accurate and that the interpretations of the data surpass the limited worldview of the researcher. This was considered to be particularly important to ensure the quality of qualitative analysis on issues of spirituality, as the spirituality of the researcher is different from that of the research participants, and important interpretations could be missed if the researchers' own spirituality was used as lens or standard.

Data collection and context

The purpose of this paper is to theorize the experience of spiritual expression in the workplace. Narratives collected in a study with a wider focus of the

influence of spirituality on work behavior were chosen to illustrate the emergent theory. Participants in the primary study considered themselves to have a spiritual dimension to their lives and were actively trying to enact this in their daily life, including their working lives. The overall sample, as well as the illustrative sample drawn on in this paper, was chosen to include a broad range of religious diversity as well as those who had a spiritual belief but did not belong to any religion. Participants in the primary study came from a wide variety of cultural and occupational backgrounds as shown in Table I.

These participants were chosen to represent the range of spiritual affiliations present in New Zealand. The illustrative narratives in this paper are representative of all these narratives.

Research participants were asked to tell their career (defined as a sequence of paid and non-paid working roles) histories. The interview in which these histories were told started with the following statement by the researcher: "over the phone we briefly discussed the purpose of this research. I am interested in the interface of your spiritual and/or religious beliefs and your career. In order to find out how these are in harmony or conflict, I am asking you to tell me the story of how your career developed over time. Please start from where you feel you should start. I will not interrupt your process of telling but if at any stage you need some time to reflect, want me to turn off the tape recorder, or need a break, please let me know". The introduction was designed so as not to guide the research outcomes to any significant extent, as is appropriate for exploratory research (Tierny and Lincoln, 1997), also to get a richness of data associated with narrative (Polkinghorne, 1997), to enable the individual through the telling of his or her career "story" to reflect on his or her deeper meanings and values in relation to career (Lax, 1996). This is appropriate also to safeguard the internal validity, which is one of the strengths of the qualitative approach (Ritchie *et al.*, 1997), and necessary to bring rigor to doing research into the subjective. All research participants commented on problems relating to expressing spirituality without any prompting, indicating that the negotiation of expression of spirituality is an important concern for those who are trying to enact their spirituality in their working lives.

The narratives and the study from which they were drawn should be viewed within its context. New Zealand is a relatively secular society with a church

Nationality	9 New Zealand Pakeha; 2 New Zealand Maori; 1 German/Samoan; 1 American; 3 English
Religion	Anglican (2); Baha'i (2); Buddhist (1); Catholic (2); Christian, no particular denomination (2); Follower of Gurumai (1); Haahi Rangitu (1); Jewish (1); Mormon (1); Quaker (1); Spiritual, no particular denomination (2)
Occupation	HR Manager (1); Packer supermarket (1); Trainer (2); Manager (3); Industrial Chaplain (1); Systems Manager (1); Painter (1); Oyster-farmer (2); Priest (1); Teacher (1); Business Owner (2)
Gender	8 Males 8 Females
Age	All participants were between 40 and 50 years old

Table I. Study sample

attendance declining faster than in most Western countries but the majority of the population (70 per cent) still professes to have a belief in God or some other divine or universal source (Webster, 1992) and an increasing number of people are joining non-Western religions such as Buddhism. Visible spirituality is often encountered within the religious rites of weekend church services (i.e. Christian churches predominate), weddings, baptisms and funerals. Spiritual subtlety is often expected outside the confines of the endorsed religious rites. Under such restricted normative circumstances it does not take much to distinguish one's self spiritually from the societal norm.

Data analysis

Each narrative was examined for evidence of the way the informant dealt with his/her spirituality in the workplace. Sections within each narrative were coded and recoded using an iterative analytical process modelled on constant comparison technique that lies at the heart of the Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This involved coding data into categories that emerged from one narrative and then considering subsequent narratives in terms of these codes, refining the categories each time until they adequately fitted the entire collection of narratives.

The conceptual framework

Three interrelated dimensions cycled through the narratives and together provided the mechanism for determining the level at which spirituality was expressed (or silenced) in the workplace. These dimensions were stimuli, analysis-leading-to-decision and action. Stimuli refers to the cues individuals used to stimulate active consideration of spiritual expressiveness. Analysis-leading-to-decision refers to the decision-making process (or lack off) that ensued, while actions refers to the responses that were attributed to this decision-making process. It is important that the reader appreciates that the actions taken by informants were seldom the result of a single stimulus-decision-making-action cycle (SDA). A narrative can give this impression when studied line by line. When the narrative is considered as a whole, however, an elaborate mesh of cycles is often revealed. This means that the analysis for each narrative shown in Table II should be considered as a whole rather than merely as a sequence of discrete SDA cycles.

Within each dimension of an SDA cycle there were a range of different sub-dimensions. Stimuli could be internally referenced inferences (e.g. inferences based upon feeling states) or externally referenced inferences (e.g. based upon perceptions of the workplace environment). They could be conclusions drawn from comparisons between past and present workplaces or from data from empirical "tests". Thus the stimuli that prompted the SDA cycles spread across a continuum from internal, intuitive factors to the results of empirical processes relying on sensory data.

Decision-making could take many forms but frequently involved judgements of cause-effect and confirmatory thinking (i.e. confirming

Table II. Narratives on spiritual expression in the workplace

Narrative	Stimuli	Analysis→decision	Actions
Chris (community manager, public service)			
I was very much a closet, sort of yoga person and I did not talk about my Guru much to people, who I knew would be very skeptical and cynical about Gurus and the word Guru has so many connotations that as soon as you use that word, I sort of felt like I had to give this whole long lecture of explain what Guru actually means to people. So I would avoid it	Perceived sense of fit anticipated skeptical and cynical reactions (externally referenced inferences)	Decided could not deal with consequences	Avoidance
But I wanted to introduce people in my organization to meditation and this put me in a situation where I had to really come out of the closet within the organization in terms of saying well, you know, I do this kind of thing, I meditate. I invited various people along	Desire to take on role of change agent intentionality (internally ref. inferences)	In order to act as change agent I have to come out of the closet	Openness
I talked to all these people and discovered that some were kind of fundamentalist Christians and I realized that I had to keep away from them and not teach them about these things because it got them upset	Consequence: some people got upset (empirical data)	When people get upset I should keep away from them	Avoidance
But I made that decision to be constantly very open and also realized that I needed to just talk not make judgements about who I spoke about this to, not censor necessarily, be undiscriminating but not miss opportunities and to allow other forces to be at work	Re-assessment and decision (reasoning)	If I am not evangelical then people are unlikely to react negatively and I allow other forces to be at work	Openness
In the end I even ran a couple of programs within the council and by that time I think I was feeling confident enough that I belonged there	Perceived sense of fit (internally ref. inference)	When I feel I belong I can do things (i.e. in-group status allows action)	Praxis

(continued)

Table II.

Narrative	Stimuli	Analysis→decision	Actions
Caitlin (manager health services)			
I was feeling the conflict between not being able to express myself spiritually quite as I wanted. I was a closet Buddhist. There was a strong Christian influence within the foundation. Whenever I came across anything religious it would be God and Heaven and be with Jesus. I felt I'd better tread very carefully with my Buddhism out of respect for people who had lost children. God and Christ were their means of coping. I also felt I had to do this because people have the weirdest ideas of what a Buddhist actually is and they would have been alarmed that I would rush around in an orange robe and shave my head, so I was circumspect because of that	Perceived sense of fit (internally referenced perception) Anticipation of others' reactions/perceptions (internally referenced inference)	Judged consequences for others as undesirable	Concealment
I started to make reference generally to a few people and I erected a little shrine on the windowsill. I found a piece of Kauri gum that is faintly in the shape of the Buddha so there's my Buddha and then I found a piece of red rock which is like the Sangha and a faint blue green glass bottle top end so I put those three on my windowsill and there are my three jewels right in front of me every day. Not one person ever asked what they were so it was quite good it didn't freak them out. My little shrine helps me to recollect that one needs to be mindful about what one is doing and skilful in one's speech and compassionate in one's dealings and non-judgmental	Desire to openly operate by Buddhist spiritual values at work (intentionality)	If no response or no negative response then it is OK to take limited action (especially at personal level)	Limited signalling of Buddhist identity. (NB., coupled with analysis)
I felt my identity is so tied up with who I am in connection with my work. With the ability to earn a wage, with that recognition from the world. It is so goal oriented and I want to become process oriented and I want to really let go and explore. Be more open, be more open to being able to respond in a more genuine way rather than what I perceived as a confined way	Perception of incongruity between work's ways and own ways (comparative assessment) Desire to work on own terms (intentionality)	Probleming: preferred way is judged as less confining but not endorsed. Worker is compromised if she wishes to maintain a positive work identity	Non-action

(continued)

Narrative	Stimuli	Analysis→decision	Actions
Hannah (trainer, manufacturing)			
A group of Jewish women recently got together and just talked and we all said then how good it was to actually say things and not have to be conscious of what you are saying, and the other people will understand that. I mean, they may only be the things like the importance of being with the family on Friday nights. I do not often have that in my present work environment and feel like a bit of an oddball here. For example, at my current job, if I can't go out for company drinks on Friday nights, because I am Jewish, people challenge this and while I still do not drink, I do not often explain this anymore. Where in my previous job in which I worked with lots of Maori I could say "hey, and that is not good enough for you guys not to recongnize that". Because their culture and their spirituality was a big part of their lives and we were acknowledging that, we were terribly politically correct then, in every aspect, so that was just another part of it really. Recongnizing and affirming diversity	Perceived lack of fit (internally referenced perception) Data Results of comparative analysis	Shared data confirms the comparative analysis and sense of lack of fit When your explanations are not accepted you don't try again	Private action and public concealment Non-action
Ther was a belief in something outside of just machines and systems. I guess that is what it is. And that might even be somebody in the group who was into women's spirituality and she would say "God is all providing, the universe provides". You could say those things. So, that was an expression of where she was coming from, which was, "hey, you know, it is okay, these things will take care of themselves". I cannot imagine saying those things in my current work environment, it seems out of place	Perception of incongruity between current and previous work's ways (comparative assessment)	Current workplace is so different so it is inappropriate to act in ways consistent with the old one	Non-action
I sometimes worry for the workers here who are deeply religious Pacific Islanders, and I tried to start with prayers once but they looked at me as if I was mad because it didn't fit here. But they would normally all start their meetings with a prayer. Even when we had Christmas lunch, the natural thing for them would be to bless the food, but they don't, and I think its because they know it doesn't belong here	Data	Perceived incongruency of others' reaction is taken to confirmed others' judgement of non-fit	Cessation of action

(continued)

Table II.

Table II.

Narrative	Stimuli	Analysis→decision	Actions
Recently I'm finding a way through all this. I am working with a group of women from different departments and I have more of a sense of belonging. There seems more respect for each other's values and we communicate these more openly	Sense of fit (externally referenced inference)	Others seem more like me so it is OK to express personal values	Openness
William (systems manager, manufacturing)			
In my previous workplace I did not integrate my Quaker beliefs. The car industry was dominated by multinationals with very hierachical structures. I knew I was in level seven and there were twenty-six levels. The New Zealand manager was on level 13, so he was half way up to heaven. So there were all these levels and in that kind of environment it was very easy to get swamped and very difficult to be different	Perception that it is difficult to be different in hierarchical company (externally referenced inference)	Anticipated difficulty precluded testing	No action
After a string of computing jobs in different production companies, it was the construction company I am currently working for that gave me the "break" I now think I must have been looking for. The construction comapany was in trouble and needed its employees to start thinking much more creatively to move forward. To achieve this they put all employees on leadership skills. Over the years I had become quite cynical. It had become a habit I wanted to get rid of. So I had already identified there were some things I wanted to change about myself. In the course there was a huge sense of group identity and a set of values which I suddenly realized that I had had for a long time and had been hiding for years. And I came to a major realization that these could be compatible with my work. Values of service, integrity, understanding what you want, but also what other people want, being vulnerable and taking risks. So it was now legitimate to express theses values in the work place	Comparative analysis	Judgement of incongruity between personal values and mode of operation	See below
	Perception of fit and endoresement (externally referenced inference)	Judgement that the hidden values could be safely expressed in new climate	Action: articulating and enacting values at work
And through the course I discovered many like-minded souls, which is important to me and which I now actively look for. It seems to be important to me now that where I do have influence that that influence is used to create an environment and uphold those values so that other people feel that it's safe or that it's valuable or worthwhile to be that way	Perception of group shared values (externally referenced inference)	The values are important to others too so it is important for me to facilitate their expression	Praxis

(continued)

Table II.

Narrative	Stimuli	Analysis→decision	Actions
Hone (manager community centre)			
In my previous job in the manufacturing environment I prayed as I think I need spiritual help to help me out in whatever needed doing. But I could not express spirituality fully in terms of my traditions, I would not open meetings with a prayer. I feel actions speak louder than words and I tried to put my beliefs into action in my role as a supervisor	Perception of lack of fit (comparative analysis)	Anticipated negative reaction	Limited action: some enactment of values
I never had my Moko Whakairo done. I actually approached the Manager when I was made Supervisor, when I asked the Manager what their policy was on tattoos, he actually said to me "well, effectively it will stop your progression on the corporate ladder". And I said "fair enough" but I knew it was going to happen one day.	Data	Immediate situation justifies short-term acceptance does not preclude longer-term action	Delayed action Makes expression of spirituality a condition of accepting a new position
I had the opportunity to opt for redundancy and I started looking for a new job and I did 24 job interviews out of which I was offered 14 positions. The reason why I choose my current job was that I had decided my future employers had to meet two conditions. One was to allow me to get my Moko Whakairo done and the other was for me to be Maori in my work and bring Maori and Pakeha together from my place of strength. And I asked the interviewers "What are your perceptions on that?" My Moko Whakairo is a physical expression (of my spiritual beliefs), because my life and how it is passed on to me by my ancestors is all included and explained in my Moko Whakairo and that is why I wear it with a passion and with pride. The answer that they gave me (at my current job) decided that this was the position that I would take out of the 14. Because the answer that the panel gave me was "we won't judge you on how you look if you have a Moko Whakairo' and in terms of your tradition "we look on that as a partnership under the Treaty of Waitangi", so that made me accept this position, because although they were all Pakeha, they were taking on board my traditions and what I believed	Desire for congruency between preferred ways and workplace ways (intentionality) Data Perception that data meant values would be respected (externally referenced inference)	Evidence suggests congruency between workplace and desired way of operating	Action: wearing Moko and working in a Maori way

(continued)

Table II.

Narrative	Stimuli	Analysis→decision	Actions
Regina (industrial chaplin)			
I struggled with expressing spirituality. I did not want to be presumptuous or patronising and say to them that I saw them all as spiritual beings, as they may not see themselves like that. Yet that was what was driving me in my work and I could only express this at the Chaplain's meetings. While my head told me this made sense, I often felt somewhat incomplete at work, as if I could not bring in my own source	Perception of non-fit (internally referenced inference)	When your ideas do not appear to fit then you do not confront others with them	Concealment
I found I could not discuss God and Jesus directly in the workplace. It would make them nervous. I had to adjust my language. I would discuss Christian values such as love and compassion. Even the word love did not really seem to fit, but for example justice was okay to use. I found I could be more effective by changing to more inclusive language	Data about people's reaction	The values could be introduced but only if done in a sympathetic manner	Modified action

expectations using various intuitive or empirical stimuli). However, what we found most interesting about the processes of decision-making was the beliefs that underpinned these cognitive processes. These underpinning beliefs are given in Table II in the column marked "analysis→decision". The overarching belief is that openness and action with regard to spiritual expression in the workplace should only occur when the likelihood of negative reactions is low. The condition that is assumed to ensure the possibility of negative reactions is low, is a sense of belonging or in other words in-group status. Thus as a whole the decision-making reported in the narratives reveals a tension between group acceptance (i.e. belonging or social fit) and self-expression. This finding is not surprising as it is consistent with many theories on drive and motivation including needs-based motivational theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which assumes people are motivated to achieve a sense of belonging and that this provides a platform for achieving a sense of self-actualization (i.e. a sense of fulfilment and authentic self-expression).

The sub-categories within the dimension termed "action" stretched across a continuum from protective to political action. Between these two nodes were avoidance, concealment, cessation of action, non-action, limited signalling, openness, modified action and praxis. When the reported actions are classified into these sub-categories it is interesting to see how each narrative contains evidence of some deliberate form of spiritual expression (see Figure 1). Thus the conceptual framework suggests varying degrees of spiritual expression exist. It seems that grappling with the issue of one's spirituality in the workplace is not just a matter of choosing expression or silence. What people

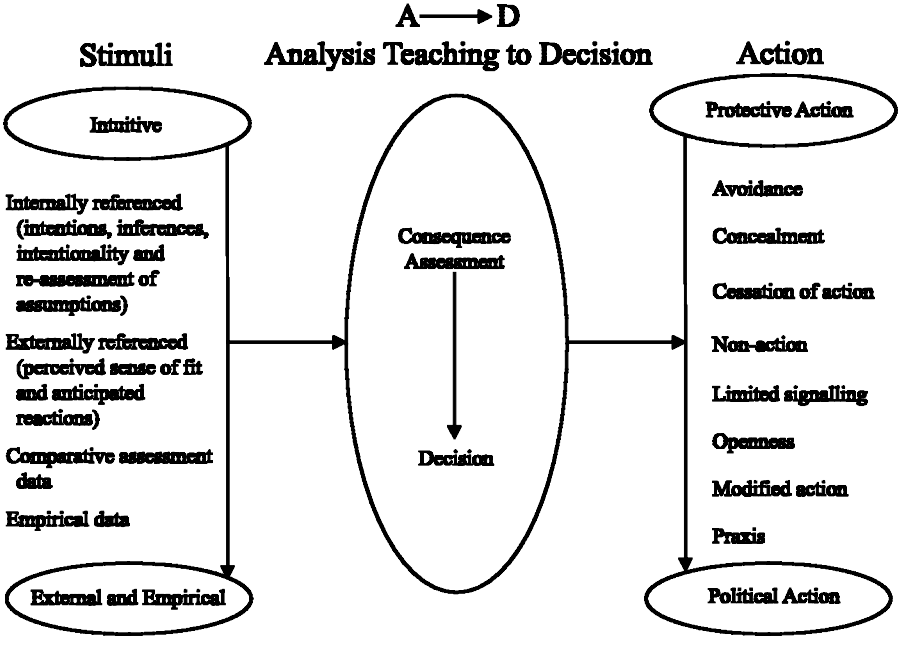

Figure 1.
A model of spiritual expression in the workplace

do is actually much more complex than this. The mesh of SDA cycles gives rise to a web of related but sometimes quite different levels of action. In Regina's narrative, for example, three sorts of spiritual action are taken: concealment, modified action and praxis. This aspect of the conceptual model is a consequence of the ongoing SDA cycles that are woven through a person's work life and should be taken to reflect the dynamic and evolving nature of spiritual expression.

In summary then, the conceptual model we are proposing suggests that dealing with spiritual expression in the workplace is made up of a mesh of interrelated stimulus-decision-making-action cycles. The outcome is an array of actions that must be understood within the context of the ongoing experience of the individual and the underpinning tension between belonging and self-expression and the belief that expression should only occur in conditions that are unlikely to foster negative reactions.

Discussion

We found an overarching belief that openness and action with regard to spiritual expression in the workplace should only occur when the likelihood of negative reactions is low. Negative reactions were anticipated as a result of perceived differences. Diversity literature is primarily concerned with marginalized social identity groups, which are usually groups that have (traditionally) been in the minority. In relation to the New Zealand context this raises interesting questions because the majority of the population still professes to have a spiritual belief. One explanation for the findings could be that as a result of an intense compound of religious traditions and a history of subtle and not so subtle religious strife, we are pre-dispositioned to pay more attention to differences than similarities. If this is the case, the distinction between religion and spirituality deserves more attention because whereas religion is connoted with predescribed practice and there are obvious differences in religious practice between religious groups, spirituality is connoted with deeply held values such as humility or integrity as well as a concern with meaningful living, which are likely to have more common ground across different religions. It is worth investigating whether, in exploring spiritual values outside the designated religious frameworks we may come to the conclusion that we have more in common than we think and if so how these commonalities can be expressed in relation to our daily work. Perhaps beyond the diversity perspective, there are other perspectives that are worth exploring.

From the narratives we can see that the stimuli that informants suggested prompted their decisions to express or not express spirituality in the workplace were tightly coupled to notions of difference and fit. As noted earlier, these "difference and fit" stimuli ranged from intuitive (i.e. internally referenced, thought stimuli) through to sensory (i.e. externally referenced, perceptual stimuli). This suggests that workers were not merely reacting to environmental cues within a vacuum. Each had an internal frame of reference which provided intuitive stimuli and primed them to detect or infer differences in spiritual

orientation and expression between themselves and others in the work environment. The presence of this internal frame of reference suggests each had a sensitivity to matters spiritual, a predisposition to make comparative and fit judgements about spiritual expression and a concern for the possibility of spiritual marginality.

The various types of stimuli fed into an analysis process which lead to decision-making that was ultimately about determining the appropriateness of spiritual expression and hinged on beliefs about the conditions necessary for expression to be appropriate. If the conditions were deemed to be likely to foster negative reactions then the decision was made to limit, conceal or avoid spiritual expression. If the conditions were considered to be unlikely to foster negative reactions then action of some sort was decided to be appropriate or possible. Evaluation of these actions was therefore inevitably tied to a consequence assessment.

Taking cognisance of the possible consequences when expressing one's sense of one's interactive experiences at work has been proposed as a key aspect of expressing workplace sensemaking (Mills, 2000). It reflects the tension people encounter between behaving normatively in order to gain approval and behaving in ways that allow expression of those deviant (i.e. from the norm) aspects of themselves that risk causing social marginalization. The illustrative narratives in this paper show how expressing one's sense of spirituality also reflect this tension which is expressed in what could be characterized as a social cost-benefit analysis.

Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) proposes that relationships are developed by managing the tension between cycles of openness and closedness across a range of conversational topics. It asserts that relationships form and deepen when individuals match increasingly personal levels of self-disclosure on shared topics of interest. Thus it is a theory of reciprocity (Griffin, 1991, p. 163). The more information two people exchange about themselves the more interpersonal their communication becomes. The least available information is psychological (i.e. attitudes, values, beliefs, feelings). This is the most person-specific and intimate and is generally the information people are most cautious about sharing. However, closer relationships are both created and sustained by reciprocated matched sharing of psychological information.

If we view the narratives from such a perspective then a more comprehensive understanding of the mesh of SDA cycles is possible. These cycles were all about determining the degree to which spiritual self-expression was possible and selecting an action characterized by an appropriate level of openness or self-disclosure. This was done by considering evidence, intuitions and intentions and how well these matched the work situation. Interestingly, none of the informants talked about taking into account the closeness of his/her relationships with others in the workplace. This is despite spirituality being a topic which demands much higher levels of disclosure and thus intimacy than such topics as sport or cars because it is intimately tied to who we are and how

we feel about ourselves. The point here is that spiritual expression ranks as a highly intimate process, requiring a level of reciprocated social penetration typical of close personal relationships. In the SDA cycles the informants were focussing on the topic of expression (i.e. spirituality) rather than the intimacy of this expression. From the discourses one could be led to conclude that spirituality was only something that reached the informant's inner sense of his/herself rather than the inner senses of each member of the audience. Certainly informants did report concern for the comfort of members of their prospective audience but overt acknowledgement that the expression of one's spirituality needs to occur within an intimate relationship that allowed reciprocal sharing were largely missing. This suggests that the silencing of spiritual expressiveness may be in the first instance a matter of congruent interpersonal relationships rather than a matter of organizational barriers to spiritual expression. If this is the case the bias towards spiritual expression in the workplace that was detected by the survey conducted by the Tannenbaum Centre could conceivably be explained as a bias against disclosures considered relationally inappropriate rather than disclosures about spirituality specifically. If this was the case then an acceptance of greater spiritual expressiveness would require revising notions of appropriate intimacy in interpersonal relationships in the workplace. This notion is interesting to explore in relation to current spirituality in the workplace literature which is concerned with individuals becoming more whole in the workplace by addressing separation not only from self and work but also others but has not yet recognized that this requires a greater level of intimacy. Furthermore, within current organizational contexts Kofodimos (1993) found that dynamic interplay between self and the organization often enhances a focus on mastery, i.e. the yearning to be independent or autonomous, to experience one's own distinctness, the self-chosenness of one's directions, to the exclusion of intimacy (Kofodimos, 1993). In other words expressing intimacy is incompatible with an organizational context in which mastery, rather than intimacy, is usually rewarded.

Social Identity Theory (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982, 1985) is a social psychological theory of inter-group behavior. In essence it proposes that the social category to which a person feels they belong provides defining characteristics of this person's identity. These characteristics are both descriptive and prescriptive, defining how the person sees him/herself and how they think and behave. People have a collection of social categories to which they claim membership and which provide defining characteristics in various contexts. Membership of a particular group becomes especially salient when the associated social identity is central to how the person evaluates him/herself across a range of contexts. This means group members are strongly motivated to see this group (i.e. in-group) more favorably than other groups to which they do not belong (i.e. out-groups) because in so doing they see themselves favorably.

When people feel excluded from or are not predisposed to belong to a group they are likely to characterize members of this group less favorably than members of groups to which they do belong in order to maintain a positive self-evaluation. Two examples of this process were evident in the narratives. Chris refers to the Christians who got upset when meditation was mentioned as "fundamentalist Christians". This classification could be interpreted as suggesting less positive group behaviors than if just the label "Christians" had been used. Similarly Caitlin assumes Christians have the weirdest ideas about what a Buddhist actually is. This assumption characterizes this out-group as being poorly informed and by implication less favorable than the group with which she identifies (i.e. Buddhist).

When we consider the insights gained by considering Social Penetration Theory alongside the categorization and self-enhancement processes at the heart of Social Identity Theory some interesting observations can be made. By being sensitive to stimuli that contribute to a sense of mismatch between his/herself and others the individual is engaging in a potentially self-exclusionary process of in-group/out-group categorization. This will be enhanced if avoidance or concealment are the chosen actions because such actions will reduce the opportunity for members of the other group to get to know vital psychological information about the individual and participate in developing a close and meaningful interpersonal relationship. Such actions could reduce the likelihood that the individual will strengthen other social identities they share with others. Thus dwelling on differences in spiritual expression rather than similarities has the potential to further marginalize the individual.

Depersonalization is the process whereby people think and act in ways that are stereotypic of a particular group. It is not necessarily a negative process as it accounts for the change in identity from an individual to group identity. It is the basic process underlying such group phenomena as cohesion, shared norms and ethnocentrism (Hogg *et al.*, 1995, p. 261). As such it works to bring differences between groups into sharp relief. Social Identity theorists would predict that by behaving in prototypically Buddhist, Maori, Jew, Quaker or Christian ways, particularly in concert with other "like-minded souls", the individual's sense of social identity and meaning is enhanced. However, this enhancement is a double-edged sword as it is likely to work against the objective of achieving fit or belonging in the wider workplace by accentuating the differences between the individual and those deemed to be in the out-group. If the theorists are right then the concern for the tension between group acceptance (i.e. belonging or sense of social fit) and spiritual self-expression revealed in the narratives is indeed justified.

Conclusion

The narratives analyzed in this paper illustrate the way workers grapple with the expression of their spirituality in the workplace using interrelated cycles of stimuli-decision-making and action that are underpinned by a tension between the need to belong and the need to express their individual spirituality. The

insights gained from conceptualizing workers' approach to spiritual expression as inter-linked decision-making cycles were extended by considering this process from the vantage points of diversity, sensemaking, Social Penetration and Social Identity theories. These analyses suggest that much can be gained by reframing the notions of spiritual expression and silencing within the contexts of consequence assessment, relationship development and social identity. When we do this we see that spiritual expressiveness is tightly linked to individual, interpersonal and social group processes that may or may not be directly governed by the formal organization. Such a conclusion complements that of those who look to organizational structure, policy and culture for explanations for the silencing of spiritual expression in the workplace. This is not to say that spiritual silencing is not something that organizations should be concerned about, but it would seem that individual and informal interpersonal and group processes may have considerable bearing on both whether an individual decides to actively and openly express their spirituality and the social consequences of this expression (or non-expression).

If an organization considers the gains of spiritual inclusivity in the workplace to be consistent with the achievement of its goals then there appears to be several principles that could be usefully employed to encourage a diversity of spiritual expression. The first is that it is necessary to recognize that because spirituality is at the heart of many people's sense of identity its expression is perceived to be risky. This is because it brings with it a sense of personal vulnerability which is magnified for those who perceive themselves to be spiritually different to the majority or norm. It is therefore not surprising that the narratives reveal a deep-seated preoccupation with consequences. Secondly, an organization needs to uncover the ways in which it inadvertently supports the expression of mastery at the exclusion of intimacy and work to eliminate these. Thirdly, if we accept that the relational context shapes how people express their own spirituality and react to expressions of spirituality by others then any action taken by an organization to enhance trust and relationship development should reduce the potential for spirituality to be a source of marginalization in the workplace.

We hope other researchers choose to use the framework described in this paper to explore spiritual expression in the workplace in greater depth and extend the framework by considering it in the light of other relevant theories (e.g. social judgement theory). We look forward to the insights offered here being considered in future discussions of diversity management theory and practice in relation to spirituality.

Note

1. The survey was performed by the Tannenbaum Centre for Interreligious Understanding and The Society for Human Resource Management Research. The full report was published on the Internet in 2001 and is available from www.tannenbaum.org

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