THEISTIC PRACTICE AND COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT

This article asserts that psychotherapists and counselors are most effective in their work with clients when their practice approach aligns with their worldviews. Assessment and intervention strategies for theistic counselors and psychotherapists are proposed. An example of a theistic community intervention conducted following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti is presented. Research conducted in tandem with this intervention found that survivors tended to grow spiritually and psychologically following the earthquake when they experienced the following: (a) perceived daily experiences with God or a higher force, (b) a belief that God or a higher force is aware of them, (c) a sense of community and purpose within the community, and (d) the view that God has and will intervene on their behalf.

Keywords: trauma, theism, community, practice, intervention

The role of theism in psychology and psychotherapy has varied substantially over time and across scholars. Some scholars, including those who might identify themselves as theists, prefer to address psycho-spiritual variables non-theistically as they feel that theism in psychology taints true scientific investigation. Other scholars identify as non-theistic and yet are interested in studying psycho-spiritual variables, so they do so from a non-theistic stance. These two groups tend to feel satisfied with the status quo in which theism is withheld from psychological investigation. Theist scholars tend to be unsatisfied with current conditions in the field.

Many researchers have acknowledged theism by addressing theistic factors as viable areas of investigation within the psychological sciences. Based upon these findings, other scholars have created theistic interventions that are intended to assess and treat psycho-spiritual concerns (Aten, O'Grady, Worthington, 2011; Richards & Bergin, 2005). The movement of theism back into psychology and psychotherapy required a great deal of courage, tenacity, and finesse by our forebears in the field.

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(i.e., William James, Allen Bergin, Gordon Allport, etc.). They opened a door that had been firmly closed by scholars who were fighting to gain a serious foothold for psychology within the scientific community. Although there is ample room to criticize the developmental journey of the field relative to theism, another perspective is that the field is engaged in a natural, necessary, and evolutionary trajectory towards an inclusive, ethical, and sophisticated conceptualization of psychological science and practice.

Theistic Psychotherapy

Despite some intellectual advancement, some would argue that in many ways, the field is still in its infancy and that we are only able to speculate about the implications of a truly inclusive conceptualization of science in which theism is accepted on an assumptive level. Currently, most theistic scholars still study spirituality as an object of study rather than an acceptable framework for study (O’Grady & Richards, 2011). Also, the few clinicians who are trained in spiritual interventions are trained to understand spiritual issues from a non-theistic mindset and intervene likewise. For example, a clinician trained to assess and address God image issues with a client might be considered to be a theistic psychotherapist. However, this label may be misapplied if the clinician was trained to assess God image as an illusory compensatory feature of the psyche rather than to assess the client’s God image based upon his or her actual relationship with God or a higher force (O’Grady & Richards, 2007). The latter form of assessment is based upon a theistic assumption and will likely lead to more cohesive and responsible treatment planning. The former represents a conceptualization of a spiritual variable from a non-theistic lens. Treatment planning created by a theist for a theist but assessed and implemented through a non-theistic approach is likely to be to some degree disingenuous and inconsistent in its delivery. Some may even argue that a clinician cannot be seriously considered a theistic psychotherapist when theism is removed from any level of the practice protocol (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010).

A Theistic Approach to Practice

A theistic approach to psychological practice would necessarily include a theistic view of the clinician, the client/population, assessment and intervention. The remainder of this article will touch on a few of the