**Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle: Perceptions of Spirituality
and the Quest to Remain Faithful**

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Abstract:
Undergraduates who encounter spiritual struggle need academic and religious leaders who can understand their experiences to effectively support them. This study extends the research on undergraduate spiritual struggle by capturing and interpreting Evangelical Christian undergraduates' descriptions of their spiritual struggle experiences. Beyond classic categories, this study proposes a separating-integrating continuum as a lens for understanding how students' perspectives influence the kinds of spiritual struggles they encounter and the resources they access to work through that struggle. Thirty-nine interviews were conducted with twenty undergraduates in a qualitative study at a Research I, Midwestern university. By providing richer descriptions of Evangelical, undergraduate spiritual struggles, academic and religious leaders will be more aware and better prepared to support these students in their quests to remain faithful.

Introduction

We can be inspired by and grateful for those in educational and ministry contexts who take an interest in college students and seek to support them as they navigate their lives toward adulthood. Educators and ministry leaders are often the most willing to listen to students and advocate for their voices to be heard. Still, the spiritual journeys of undergraduates often get clouded by generalized assumptions and limited perspectives that keep educators and ministry leaders from seeing, hearing, and supporting students and their spiritual journeys. Many educators admit that students' spiritual perspectives are difficult to address because they are often hidden from formal class settings where students consider the classroom high risk. Many religious leaders admit being puzzled by young people disconnecting from their churches and denominations, and confess being unsure as to how to engage them should they ever come back. A more nuanced way of articulating undergraduates' spiritual journeys, and spiritual struggle in particular, is needed.

Contrary to some assumptions, college students report coming to college valuing spirituality and wanting to integrate their spirituality with their experiences. Still, students experience spiritual struggle when they try to integrate their learning and spirituality within the college environment. Often they will need to adjust their spiritual beliefs as they gain new knowledge and more experience. This personal struggle of integrating their spiritual beliefs can manifest itself in positive, but also negative ways. Positively, spiritual struggle helps students critically reflect on their beliefs, thereby promoting greater development and a more mature understanding of themselves, others, and their place in the world. This process can lead to further growth in personal responsibility, compassion, and more openness toward those who are different from them. Negatively, students who encounter spiritual struggle often report

experiencing stress, anxiety, and even fear. They feel pressure to conform to family or religious

group expectations, which can lead to oppression by those in authority and isolation from those

with diverse perspectives. Spiritual struggle has also been reported to have positive and negative

effects on academic studies, relationships, and personal health (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010;

Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005;

Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). This project sought to contribute to the knowledge of

undergraduate spiritual development by examining the college-related factors that Evangelical

students perceive as either supporting or impeding them as they work though that same spiritual

struggle. More and better understanding can help those in educational and religious contexts

support undergraduates in these crucial periods of spiritual and holistic development. While this

study situates particularly in an educational context, it is relevant to all who are interested in

undergraduates' meaning making, including those in education, student development, parachurch

ministry, and the local church.

Research Questions

In light of the aforementioned problem, this study presented the following research

question: From the perspective of undergraduate students who have come from the Evangelical

Christian tradition, what factors support or impede their experiences when working through

spiritual struggle while at college?

The research sub-questions included: a) What does spiritual struggle mean for

Evangelical undergraduates? b) For those Evangelical undergraduates who have experienced

spiritual struggle, what do they view as the particular sources or issues that relate to that

struggle? What brought the struggle on for them? c) Specifically, what college-related factors

(resources, relationships, experiences) do these undergraduates perceive as affecting how they

handled their struggle? d) How have the experiences of undergraduates who have worked through spiritual struggle influenced other areas in their lives (major/career decisions, relationships, interests, beliefs, religious practices, etc.)? and e) What recommendations can Evangelical undergraduates offer to their higher education institutions for ways to better support this group of students as they experience and manage personal spiritual struggle (Argue, 2015)?

Terminology and Literature

The key literature that framed this study includes the available works on spiritual development, particularly the research on emerging adulthood, undergraduate spirituality, spiritual struggle, and Evangelical Christian students.

Terminology

One of the challenges acknowledged in most of the research on religious, spiritual, and spiritual development concepts in higher education is the difficulty of defining religious and spiritual terms. While enlightenment influences deemed religion and spirituality as irrelevant to higher education, a growing awareness of a metaphysical void in higher education brought forth new questions for how colleges and universities should address spiritual and religious elements that affect student learning and development (Astin, 2004; Raper, 2001; Speck, 2005; Thelin, 2004). Initial solutions sought to separate the spiritual self (the internal, affective, and mystical) from the religious self (influenced by institutional dogma) (Astin, 2004; Love & Talbot, 1999; Nash, 2001; Speck, 2005). Polarization of one's religion and one's spirituality created a false dichotomy, culturally reinforced by a privatized spirituality, that short-circuited critical self-reflection and diminished public dialogue on spiritual and religious topics (Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2008; Speck, 2005). More recent approaches by educators have now acknowledged the unique, yet interdependent, relationship of one's religion and spirituality (Chickering, Dalton,

& Stamm, 2006; P. C. Hill et al., 2000; Nash, 1999). For the purposes of this study, the definitions and the relationships between these terms are given here.

Religious and spiritual. One's "religion" (whether theistic, atheistic, or agnostic) in this study, describes the cultural background and worldview narrative of an individual that contributes to the way people make meaning through defining and describing their daily experiences and practices. Religion affects people's spirituality by framing their spiritual behaviors and language, connecting them with others with similar traditions (via discussion, ritual, gathering, etc.), and helping them express their views respectfully to others of different religious perspectives (in discussion, dialogue, or debate). "Spirituality," in this study, is defined as one's meaning-making efforts that inform the way one lives in and relates to the world and others, transforming and encouraging that person to move toward the *telos* (goal) of having a more mature, congruent, and faithful way of living.

Hill (2000) and Smith & Snell (2009) argued for the inseparability of one's spirituality and religiousness. Smith & Snell (2009) concluded that the majority of emerging adults are more accurately described as conventional spiritual followers who are trying to fit in rather than as detached spiritual seekers, and indeed, hold that "spiritual but not religious" assumptions rarely do apply to emerging adults. Similarly, Bryant et al. (2003) observed that spirituality and religiousness are highly correlated concepts, while Clydesdale (2007) noted that most incoming freshman who describe themselves as spiritual, typically express their spirituality in conventional religious terms. Thus, this study takes into account that the religious backgrounds of undergraduates do affect the way they understand, talk about, and express their spirituality. It also acknowledges that one's religious background likely does affect the ways that many students experience spiritual struggle and also the ways they attempt to work through,

understand, and apply that struggle to their learning experiences.

Spiritual development. Researchers have argued that spiritual development fosters students' well-being (Temkin & Evans, 1998), contributes to an interdisciplinary foundation (Inayatullah & Gidley, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999), acknowledges personal "conversion" or transformation (Fowler, 1995; Vella, 2000; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998), encourages greater authenticity and a more integrated self (Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999; Murphy, 2005; Stewart, 2005; Tisdell, 2003), and it supports meaning-making as one of the ways that individuals construct their knowledge and integrate their lives (Jablonski et al., 2001; Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Tisdell, 2003). Spiritual development affects these individuals' understanding of themselves, their relationship with others, and their ongoing pursuit for more meaning-making.

Spiritual development and emerging adults. Certain researchers have focused primarily on the emerging adult life-stage (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Parks, 1991, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009). They have agreed with other life-stage theorists that emerging adults experience a unique period in life where, among other things, their spirituality shapes and is shaped by their new knowledge and experiences (Arnett, 2004; Arnett et al., 2011). Something changes in the spirituality of many emerging adults, as they search to make their spirituality more true, reinterpret their worldview, and reframe their beliefs in light of their ever-growing exposure to a diversity of worldviews and experiences (Arnett, 2004; Parks, 2011).

Spiritual development and undergraduates. A select group of researchers have studied emerging adult spiritual development, as that development pertains specifically to undergraduate students. Their findings suggest that a majority of undergraduates bring their religious traditions

and beliefs to campus (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin et al., 2003; Jablonski et al., 2001; Lindholm, 2007; Love, 2001; Tisdell, 2001). Studies have also reported that a majority of undergraduates who enter college have a high interest in spiritual ideas and involvement and an expectation that their college or university will support their spiritual development (Astin et al., 2003; Lindholm, 2007). Simultaneously, some educators have called spirituality in higher education a "blind spot" that needs more and better understanding by educators (Collins & et al., 1987; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010; Rue, 1985; Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Undergraduate spiritual struggle. One of the most challenging parts of spiritual development appears when a person leaves old paradigms behind to embrace new, truer ideas that support that personal meaning-making (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Fowler, 1981; Pargament et al., 2005; Parks, 2011). These crucial periods have been described as suffering, betrayal, doubt, questioning, struggle, anger at God, despair, crisis, the "dark night of the soul," a disorienting experience, pivotal moment, shipwreck, or conversion (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fowler, 1995; P. C. Hill & Pargament, 2003; Mezirow, 2000; Parks, 2011). Terms presented across most of the literature to explain this part of spiritual development describe these defining moments as spiritual or religious struggle. Based on the often overlapping or synonymous uses of religious struggle and spiritual struggle in the literature and the assumption, as stated previously, that each person's spirituality is often informed by some religious framing, this study uses the term "spiritual struggle" to describe those critical periods that people experience when they realize that their spiritual and/or religious practices must shift to accommodate the new experiences or new information they encounter. Beyond terminology, however, researchers have observed that spiritual struggle is a common phenomenon that affects college students. Bryant & Astin (2008) offered that "struggles of a spiritual nature are a reality

for college students" (p. 23), while Rockenbach, et al (2012) noted that spiritual struggle is a known source of challenge for a "considerable portion of college students" (p. 55). Further, spiritual struggle has been reported to impact the academic, social, and emotional well-being of college students (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Rockenbach et al., 2012).

Evangelical undergraduates and spiritual struggle. This study looked specifically at Evangelical Christians. Evangelicals are the one category of religious groups on campus that typically have a larger organized presence on a campus, but are often less open to dialogue, remain more separate from campus activities, and are more susceptible to spiritual struggle (Bryant, 2006; J. P. Hill, 2009; Magolda & Gross, 2009). Magolda and Gross (2009) have stated that the "academy remains largely ignorant about the intricacies of Evangelical organizations and uncertain how to meet the unique needs of evangelical students while remaining true to core, secular institutional values" (p. 11).

The Study

The studies that have researched spiritual struggle have all encouraged more qualitative research on unique campus environments with students from particular religious (including non-religious) backgrounds (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012). This study thus conducted 39 interviews with 20 participants who were juniors or seniors, identified their family religious traditions as conservative and/or Evangelical Christian, and self-identified as having experienced a shift or change in their spiritual or religious beliefs or practices while in college. A phenomenographic method of qualitative research was used to better understand how the participant undergraduates all attending the same public university perceive, think about, and conceptualize their experiences. The emphasis was on the specific phenomenon of spiritual struggle. Special attention was given to distinguish students' descriptions of spiritual struggle

from other common forms of human struggles they experience while attending college. The interviewees sought to make sense their spiritual struggle experiences where everyday events were often catalysts for struggle, but their struggles had transcendent elements that caused students to question their views of God, their Christian identity, and their relationships with others (Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

Spiritual Struggle Within Classic Categories

Rockenbach et al. (2012) described "classic understandings" of spiritual struggle (p. 71) as those struggles typically described from previous literature on spiritual struggle: gaining independence, critically reflecting on religious beliefs, and establishing one's own personal commitments. This current study initially used "on-campus" and "off-campus" domains to classify students' descriptions in clearer descriptive categories and to attempt to compare findings with past studies. This current study confirmed the previous research by indicating that Evangelical undergraduates share, on the surface, similar kinds spiritual struggles described in the literature.

On-campus and off-campus factors. On-campus factors influencing spiritual struggle described spiritual challenges that the students experienced as the result of a particular experience at college. There were eight major areas of concern: educational/classroom experiences; finding friends and connecting relationally; dating, sex, relationships; philosophical/theological intellectual and relational encounters; substance abuse and destructive behavior; campus religious groups (CRGs); sexual assault; and specifically for females, integrating gender, faith, and feminism. Off-campus factors influencing spiritual struggle related to the spiritual challenges students experienced beyond their campus locations. These included family deaths/illness, hometown expectations, and sexual assault. In light of the students'

religious and family backgrounds and how they invested their time during college, it is not surprising that the factors affecting their struggles primarily involved their new experiences at college. The off-campus factors that students reported were more event-oriented, such as the death or sickness of a family member, coming home to bad influences, or experiencing sexual assault from someone away from college.

On-campus and off-campus resources. The students' perceived resources, relationships, and/or experiences used for working through struggle were again summarized in the same two categories that were used for the factors affecting struggle– on-campus and off-campus. The on-campus resources, relationships, and/or experiences that these students described overwhelmingly placed friends as their most common resource followed by CRG programs and leaders (for those who attended CRGs), and faculty/class resources. As off-campus resources, students most preferred working out their struggles on their own, although they also sought out parents or family members, saw a counselor/therapist, and/or accessed their home or campus church connections. Interestingly, even though most students described themselves as being invested in their home churches prior to coming to college, few described church as a resource they sought out in periods of struggle.

Spiritual Struggle within the Realm of Spiritual Development

The limitations of the classic descriptions, noted by both by Rockenbach et al. (2012) and Fisler et al. (2009) are that they fail to take into account the uniqueness of students' backgrounds, maturity, or kinds of the struggles experienced. Still, the attempt to generally classify students' descriptions of factors affecting their spiritual struggles and the resources they accessed to work through those struggles within on-campus and off-campus domains were intended to provide helpful categories for universities to consider. Universities can more directly address on-campus

categories, while off-campus categories are those that the university would be wise to be aware of and understand. This study, however, sought to further understand students' spiritual struggle experiences by providing a thicker description of what Rockenbach et al. (2012) described as a more specific "texture" of the spiritual struggles students experience (p. 62). A conceptual framework adapted from Parks' (2011) model on spiritual development allowed for a closer examination of the spiritual struggles that students described and the meanings they placed on their experiences. While developmental stages within knowing, dependence, and community are defined in this model, this study added additional labels *between* stages to characterize the struggle students' described.

Struggle Within the Form of Knowing

Within the form of knowing, spiritual struggle occurs as undergraduates begin to critically reflect on their beliefs and worldviews, often questioning what those in authority have taught them. *Doubting struggle*, occurs when students reconsider their inherited (Authority Bound Dualistic) beliefs in light of new information and experiences. Students express doubt or feel challenged when they address existential questions of evil, death, war, disparity, etc. In doubting struggle, students articulate more emphatically what they do not believe, and their thinking can be easily influenced by contexts and relationships (Unqualified Relativism). Next, *articulating struggle,* occurs as students embark on a quest to test and try out new belief systems or worldviews, often experiencing a "divided self" by attempting to synthesize what they already know and accept along with what they are learning or experiencing (Probing Commitment). *Integrating struggle,* occurs as young people take responsibility for their own thinking and knowing and seek to live in a way that is both committed to and congruent with their emerging beliefs (Tested Commitment) (Parks, 2011).

Struggle Within the Form of Dependence

Within the form of dependence, undergraduates wrestle with the affective elements that are associated with spiritual struggle. *Negative feelings,* ensue as students seek to develop their spirituality less from external (religious leaders, adults, parents) influences (Dependent/Counter-Dependent) and more from an internal locus of authority wherein they are making their spirituality their own (Fragile Inner-dependence). People during this period of negativity may experience feelings of guilt, shame, insecurity, betrayal, rebellion, sadness, or anger. As they work through their negative feelings, some continue to internalize and own their beliefs for themselves and experience *positive feelings*, where they find comfort, confidence, congruency, and peace with the person they are becoming spiritually (Confident Inner-Dependence) (Parks, 2011).

Struggle Within the Form of Community

Within the form of community, undergraduates reconsider their loyalties and relationships to the people or groups with whom they associate. *Separating struggle,* emerges as young people move from an uncritical loyalty to a group that is "just like me" (Conventional) toward questioning the groups assumptions and distinctions. This can then lead students to separating themselves (philosophically and/or physically) from familiar groups, families, or relationships (Diffuse). Next, *seeking struggle* occurs as students search for a community that welcomes, supports, or encourages their evolving perceptions of a more inclusive group (Mentoring Community). Beyond attending a community, students may experience *contributing struggle* as they try to find their place or role within the communities with whom they choose to associate. Here, they are striving to be more than attenders or receives or the community and are striving toward being contributors (Self-Selected Class/Group) (Parks, 2011).

Spiritual Struggle Textures

What this framework attempts to do is provide a way to understand the varied textures of

spiritual struggle that undergraduates experience. Traditional categories fail to consider

developmental elements, and most religious communities assume struggle is primarily

intellectual struggle. These limited views limits understanding and resourcing. Figure 1 depicts

the kinds of spiritual struggle students may experience, depending on the form of that struggle

and the maturity of spiritual development. Note in Figure 1, that spiritual struggle occurs in

between stages of equilibrium, will likely happen more than once, and may be experienced

intellectually, emotionally, and/or relationally. Placing more specific attention on where and

what kinds of spiritual struggle undergraduates experience, creates opportunities for a more

refined understanding of the struggle that the students describe.

Elements of Spiritual Development	Adolescent		Young Adult	Tested Adult	
Forms of Knowing (Cognitive)	Authority Bound Dualistic	Unqualified Relativism	Probing Commitment	Tested Commitment	
Struggle within Knowing	*Doubting struggle* Doubting what has been taught them; asking questions on the problem of evil, pain, suffering, injustice; existential questions, etc.; articulating what they don't believe anymore.	*Articulating struggle* Attempting to articulate one's own beliefs; seeking to offer alternative rationales for what they assumed or were taught.	*Integrating struggle* Growing confidence in articulating their own beliefs/worldview; learning to accept both/and new categories rather than either/or.		
Forms of Dependence (Affective)	Dependent/ Counter-Dependent		Fragile Inner-Dependence	Confident Inner-Dependence	
Struggle within Dependence		*Negative feelings* Experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, anger, confusion, unfaithfulness, betrayal	*Positive feelings* Discovering a sense of being at peace with oneself and others		
Forms of Community (Relational)	Conventional	Diffuse	Mentoring Community	Self-selected Class/Group	
Struggle within Community	*Separating struggle* Questioning community assumptions, norms, biases, etc.; experience conflict, misunderstanding, loss and home no longer being "home."	*Seeking struggle* Seeking or searching for a place to belong to, be accepted, search, quest	*Contributing struggle* Searching for one's role within the new community; discovering the value and challenges associated with an interdependent community.		

Figure 1. Spiritual development and descriptions of spiritual struggle. Adapted from Parks' (2011) depiction of spiritual development where spiritual struggle can be experienced at various periods and in various forms. Descriptions show generally how each form of struggle is typically explained.

Identifying Spiritual Struggle Within Development

By adopting Parks' (2011) elements of spirituality (i.e. community, dependence, and knowing) descriptions for the kinds of spiritual struggle that the students described were re-characterized. This re-characterization offers additional insights into the kinds and frequency of undergraduates' spiritual struggle experiences.

Relational struggle. Within the form of community, students' described *separating struggle*, *seeking struggle*, and *contributing struggle*.

Separating struggle. Most students described the separating struggle they felt as being separated from home, parents, or religious leaders, or distancing themselves from campus churches or the CRGs they joined as freshmen. Aaron and Simon doubted the reliability of what their leaders taught them about science and claimed to be more liberal now. Jenny struggled with a CRG she tried where her peers and the leaders couldn't relate to her experiences. Joseph rejected the simple answers offered by the CRG and church leaders that he met and was now seeking a place where he could ask more questions. Mike wanted to avoid the church politics he had experienced growing up. Tom chose to not become involved in a religious group like he had done in high school (Argue, 2015).

Seeking struggle. Some sought new connections with a different faith community or connections with their academic programs. These students described their individual searches for new kinds of communities. Some students reported finding new religious or academic groups that they felt more precisely reflected their emerging spiritual ideas. Matt, Mike, Tom, and James described finding community within their academic programs. Matt explained how he felt a sense of community within his Religious Studies program. Mike felt a connection through his

pastor who was also a professor at his university and explored academic and theological topics with him. James, who considered himself an atheist, found community with his friends in his program who were also atheists and his professors with whom he worked closely. Mara, Therese, Brenda, and Jodi explained that they found churches that were more open to their changing spiritual outlooks (Argue, 2015).

Contributing struggle. Only a few students mentioned their desire to invest in local churches or groups, feeling compelled to not only benefit from these communities but to contribute to them as well. Jodi described having found an inner-city church that cared for the poor and said that she planned to invest more in that church: "I love that it's small and diverse. It's an inner-city church, so they have a breakfast. There's a pie shop, and they give us all their day-old pies. They feed the homeless. I love how inclusive it is. I could bring anyone, and they wouldn't feel unwelcome. I think in the summer I will volunteer more" (Argue, 2015).

Emotional struggle. Within the form of dependence, students' described more *negative feelings* than *positive feelings*.

Negative feelings. The overwhelming majority of students described experiencing negative emotions, primarily feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Therese doubted if she could handle what she had felt called to study in school because of its rigorous nature and Karen described a similar experience, namely, feeling "over my head." Tom may have best captured what the others felt with his description about how any change in his spiritual outlook could affect every part of his life: "You start thinking, if I was wrong about this, or I have a different perspective on this, what else am I wrong about? You change your opinion on one thing and it affects everything else" (Argue, 2015).

Positive feelings. Only four students described positive feelings related to their spiritual struggle experiences as freeing, satisfying, clarifying, and encouraging. Mitch explained that his journey was "freeing." Brenda seemed satisfied with the changes that she made in her spirituality, and she reflected: "I think it was a needed change in perspective for me. These things caused me to take a step back and reevaluate how I'm doing faith and how I'm doing life" (Argue, 2015).

Intellectual struggle. Within the form of knowing, students *doubting struggle*, *adjusting struggle*, and *integrating struggle*.

Doubling struggle. Almost half of the students experienced doubting struggle, disagreeing with the CRGs they attended or questioning their inherited beliefs acquired from family or their home religious community. While these students were able to articulate what they questioned or no longer believed, they still struggled to explain what new beliefs they did hold. For example, CRGs that Matt tried because he thought he'd find common ground "didn't work" because he realized his worldview was different from theirs and that he would have to look elsewhere to explore his emerging thoughts (Argue, 2015).

Adjusting struggle. An equal number of students experienced adjusting struggle, describing their attempts to integrate new people, new concepts, and new roles into their worldviews. These students expressed a growing awareness of the diverse perspectives available at school and a new appreciation of the complexity of the world in which they lived, even if they still remained unsure of how to integrate these new people, concepts, and roles into their lives. For example, Therese described how her beliefs had changed since coming to college: "I started to see God who was more of a loving figure than what I was taught to believe. Looking back, it

got lost in the rules and regulations and things I couldn't do, but I didn't know why" (Argue, 2015).

Integrating struggle. Only two students demonstrated integrating struggle, where they were able to use language and concepts to help them explain and question how their spirituality could be expressed through their worldview, studies, aspirations, and challenges. Indeed, they appeared to know who they were, what they believed, and how they desired to live. Brenda shared, "These activities are things I just like to do. I like to substitute teach. It's a highlight of my week. My Boy Scouts changed my perspectives. These activities cause me to take a step back and reevaluate how I'm doing faith and how I'm doing life" (Argue, 2015).

In summary. What became evident was that, *relationally*, most Evangelical students experienced a relational disconnection as they began to question or reject the religious and spiritual assumptions held by their parents, religious leaders, home churches, or the CRGs they had joined. Only some found connections with new religious or academic groups, and few described the ways they were trying to invest in these new groups. *Emotionally*, most described their negative feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious with only a few expressing positive feelings when referring to their spiritual struggles. *Intellectually*, most students doubted or acknowledged the tensions they felt between their inherited beliefs and their new ideas and experiences, and only a few were able to articulate their own, newly developed beliefs.

Implications and Considerations

By re-characterizing students' spiritual struggle experiences, implications and considerations emerged that can help educational and ministry leaders better understand and support these crucial periods in undergraduates' lives. What surfaced, first, was students' separating and integrating perceptions that affected their outlooks on their campus environment

and the struggles they experienced. Second, evangelical students' perceptions and struggle may show more similarities with students' struggle within minority religions on campus than with mainline Christian traditions. Third, the role of CRGs and the types of students who find connection varied based on students' spiritual outlooks, raising questions about CRGs place on campus. Finally, reflection is offered regarding teaching and learning, parental advice for those sending their kids to college, and some final thoughts to undergraduates themselves.

Undergraduates' Separating and Integrating Perspectives Shape Their College Perceptions and Spiritual Struggles

Capturing Evangelical students' descriptions of their spiritual struggle and classifying their struggles by adopting Parks' (2011) conceptual framework, allowed for locating students' perspectives along a separating-integrating continuum. This was important because it helped to understand how students' perspectives affected their outlooks on college, others, their religious behaviors, and their spiritual struggles. It allowed for a more nuanced way to describe the spiritual challenges experienced by students.

Evangelical students' perceptions and struggles. The way Evangelical students perceived the factors affecting spiritual struggle and the resources available to work through that struggle depended on the perspective they held. This helps better understand the sources and resources described previously as on-campus and off-campus categories. By adopting Parks' (2011) spiritual development framework to identify students' perceptions of their spiritual struggles, a continuum with two polar perspectives emerged in this study, namely, a separating and an integrating perspective.

The separating-integrating continuum has certain similarities to Fisler et al.'s (2009) continuum of resolution in that it recognizes that students are in-process as they renegotiate their

core values and will not necessarily find full resolution before they graduate. This study

highlights that those students who come from the same religious tradition, even when they may

still ascribe to that religious viewpoint, may experience and work through their spiritual struggles

quite differently. As a result, undergraduate struggle experiences are often influenced by their

separating or integrating perspectives. Specifically, this included particular categories shared by

students as noted below.

Students' espousing a separating perspective. Those students who espoused a

separating perspective shared similar outlooks on their college experiences. They viewed their

campus as hostile. They saw those who were different from them as needing to hear and believe

the truth they had without their ever considering other students' backgrounds or beliefs. They

perceived their college classes as either ignoring or attacking Christianity and had trouble

synthesizing their education with their spirituality. In addition, when asked what advice they

would give to freshmen like themselves, they encouraged freshmen to join a CRG. When asked

about their purpose for being a student now and their aspirations for the future, these students

saw their role as a student and their role as a Christian separately, and typically talked about their

future aspirations in very general terms (e.g. desiring to love God, help people, or go into

mission work). Those students holding a separating perspective were proud that they had "kept

the faith" of their families, and even though they did struggle, they didn't stray. Their

perspectives and advice did not diverge from what their adults and church leaders had told them

when they entered their freshmen year. Notably, most all of the students who held a separating

perspective still attended a CRG.

Students' espousing an integrating perspective. Those students who espoused an

integrating perspective viewed their campus as a resource filled with possibilities. They saw

others as people they needed to know, learn from, and befriend. They viewed the classroom as a

place where learning and dialogue were possible and evens helpful in their spiritual growth. In

addition, when asked what advice they would give to freshmen like themselves, they encouraged

these freshmen to branch out and try the new and many different things their campus offered.

When asked about their purpose for being a student now and their aspirations for their futures,

these students talked of learning from and contributing to their school and spoke of their future

with more particularity and specificity (e.g. exploring ways to use their teaching degree to help

inner-city kids or aspiring to pursue graduate degrees and psychology and theology to be well

rounded as a psychologist or minister). Further, students who exhibited an integrating

perspective were proud that they had found their own path, although they admitted having

struggled with feelings of unfaithfulness because their paths had diverged from the typical

Evangelical script (e.g. religious attendance, joining Bible studies, being a leader in a CRG, or

upholding foundational beliefs). In their interviews, many felt encouraged that their new

trajectories were validated. Their perspectives of college and their advice to freshmen changed

from what their parents and church leaders had told them when they entered college. They saw

the college as a resource, not a hindrance, and emphasized trying new things other than just

CRGs. Interestingly, none of the students who held an integrating perspective were attending a

CRG at the time of their interviews.

Evangelical Students' Struggle May Stem from their Thick Religious Culture and Self-Perceived Minority Status

The Evangelical students interviewed confirmed that parents and other influential adults

from home (e.g. grandparents, extended family, other adults, religious leaders) often created a

positive network of support for them as they headed off to college (Clydesdale, 2007; Smith &

Snell, 2009). Undergraduates who came from a religiously Evangelical Christian tradition brought with them something beyond theology; they also brought a distinct religious culture. Because the religious tradition of Evangelical students espouses a rich religious culture that permeates family relationships and everyday practices, these students may have more in common with minority religions on campus, such as Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, than do most Mainline Christians. If this aspect is accurate, then Bryant & Astin's (2008) observations that undergraduates holding minority religions experience more struggle may apply to Evangelicals as well. Further, this finding may shed further light on Magolda & Gross's (2009) observations that Evangelicals see themselves as "cultural outsiders" and other observations that Evangelical undergraduates gravitate toward religious organizations to avoid any perceived marginalization (Smith, 1998). It may also explain why Evangelical students report higher rates of spiritual struggle than do Mainline Christians (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant, 2007; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Jacobsen & Jacobson, 2008; Magolda & Gross, 2009). Therefore, any spiritual struggle that influences these students to consider breaking away from their inherited beliefs is quite dramatic for them, as it has not only epistemological, but also relational consequences. The findings here helped to make sense of two contradictory concepts wherein Evangelical students are typically from the majority culture (White, Middle Class, Christian, etc.) and yet perceive themselves as being in the minority and operating out of an oppositional subculture mentality (Magolda & Gross, 2009).

Campus Religious Groups (CRGs) May or May Not Help Evangelical Undergraduates

Bryant (2007) and Chickering & Reisser (1993) highlighted the important role that CRGs and other campus communities play in offering social integration for students on campus. Chickering & Reisser (1993) offered that groups that contribute to the development of students

encourage interactions between students, provide opportunities for collaboration, are small enough to make members feel significant, include people from diverse backgrounds, and serve as a positive reference point for students by maintaining boundaries and behaviors. For the students in this study, CRGs served these functions, often providing safe, familiar places for them as they sought relationships, especially during their freshmen year. Bryant (2007) noted that those groups that are more homogeneous and insulated may distract students from learning how to associate with others who are different from them. The findings from this study confirm this point. Those students who held a separating perspective toward campus, others, and their education were more likely to be involved with a CRG, while those with an integrating perspective either never joined or left their CRGs.

What this study's findings cannot answer is whether CRGs cause a separating perspective in students or if students with a separating perspective simply seek out CRGs. From the findings, however, it seems likely that because Evangelical students come to college with a developmentally less mature spirituality–more often rely on advice from home to beware of the hostile university and join a religious group; and have immediate needs to connect with peers similar to them–they seek out CRGs. Spiritually maturing students who begin to hold a more integrating perspective no longer appear to need or even may reject CRGs. Less spiritually maturing students appeared to stay with their CRGs who then reinforce and reward those views associated with the separating perspective.

From a broader perspective, recent events that have surfaced tensions between Evangelical CRGs and their universities, such as occurred at Vanderbilt, the University of North Carolina, Harvard, and the California University system are examples of the conflict felt between CRG values and the values of the university campuses that host them (Paulson, 2014). This study

highlighted subtler, but still consistent tensions in this regard. Perhaps CRGs should consider themselves as transitional groups that can help incoming freshmen socially integrate and then provide off-ramps for better integration into university resources and opportunities. Then these students can develop a more congruent existence with their university. The challenge may be of course that this approach confronts certain deeply held identities and purposes of some CRGs for actually being on campus.

Learner-Centered Pedagogy Makes a Difference

Providing on-campus support for students working through spiritual struggle may not necessarily mean universities developing specific programs as much as it means leveraging learning spaces already available on campus. Research on learner-centered pedagogy has already identified the findings further reported on in this study (Astin, 2004; English, Gillen, & Imel, 2000; Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Weimer, 2002). The encouraging aspect of this study is that faculty need not be well-versed in religious or spiritual topics to support students who are experiencing spiritual struggle. The efforts of faculty who are open to creating space, both formally and informally, for their students to integrate their religious and spiritual convictions with their education will likely suffice (Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007; Lindholm, 2007; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Nash, 2001).

While students' separating and integrating perspectives shaped their views of the classroom, most Evangelical students expressed valuing those classroom environments that invite dialogue and the sharing of their opinions. Faculty who were creative, inspirational and relevant, and who encourage smaller group discussions, were most appreciated by the students who participated in this study. They appreciated professors who noticed their religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives because they felt that these teachers wanted to know a

little bit more about them, especially through assignments, personal interactions, and sensitivity to their religious involvement outside of class. Positive faculty support for their spiritual struggle was seen in their professors' abilities to teach well and be excited about their courses, in their sensitivity to the religious backgrounds of all their students, and in their ability to create a safe and open environment where their students could wrestle with course topics and their spiritual perspectives freely and openly. Professors who were dismissive, distant, and sarcastic about spirituality were treated with suspicion. Offering class assignments to students to express their struggle and encouraging out-of-class conversations (where students feel more comfortable and less risk) can be helpful first steps.

Still, most students find classroom settings too high stakes for them to share personal, spiritual or religious views. They preferred to discuss spiritual topics in less formal settings. Thus, educators can work to create safe, low-stakes climates in the classroom but must also be privy that much of their processing may happen outside the classroom. Chickering, et al. (2006) call these outside spaces "night campus" as these are the positive and negative spaces or activates students engage in as they work out their most meaningful questions. Educational and ministry leaders who understand that students meaning making is often made beyond formal gatherings may challenge them to reconsider what supporting students and their spiritual struggle experiences looks like.

Parents' College Advice and Responses to Their Child's Spiritual Struggle Matters

This study's findings highlighted the high degree of influence students perceive their parents and religious figures have on their spiritual faithfulness. This study has also noted that students' approaches to spiritual faithfulness varied depending on the separating or integrating perspectives they held. It is the opinion of this researcher that students holding an integrating

perspective were more prepared to integrate their spiritualty with their education and experiences. Fowler (1980) and Parks (2011) have suggested that one's maturity within spiritual development is not about being more faithful but more true or helpful with navigating the complexities one encounters in life. Still, there can be faithfulness in students' spiritualty no matter where students fall on the separating-integrating continuum. This is important as, for some religious communities, faithfulness means not diverging from religious beliefs, practices, and expectations. Some participants indeed equated "faithfulness" with remaining true to their religious teachings, practices, and behaviors. For parents and religious leaders who desire for their children to uphold a separating perspective, it may behoove them to ensure that the CRGs their children join are theologically consistent in supporting their religious beliefs and practices. Alternately, other students, who held an integrating perspective, often described "faithfulness" as diverging from the religious beliefs, practices, and actions of their elders in order to integrate new ideas and experiences they had encountered at college. Parents and religious leaders should not assume that these students are leaving their religious tradition as much as reinterpreting it to remain faithful to their expanding worldviews.

Regardless of the separating or integrating perspectives, students expressed their concerns over sharing their spiritual struggles with their parents for fear of straining their relationships with them. While the extent to which students diverge from their parents' beliefs varied depending on their perspectives, most parents can help their children by encouraging, trusting, and respecting them as they work through spiritual struggle, and by recognizing that their children's spiritual paths, convictions, and expressions will likely look different than their own. Parents who can appreciate this change as spiritual growth, not unfaithfulness, will help their college children move through their spiritual struggles and help them achieve a more

integrated, self-authored faith that takes into account the traditions from which they have come. This goal may mean that parents will need to reconsider the advice they give their children before they head to college regarding the campus climate and their children's involvement in that climate. Believing popular, but misleading narratives perpetuated by movies like, "God's Not Dead" (released 2014) exaggerates the animosity between religious and educational contexts, and discourages students from finding helpful ways to integrate their faith and learning. Also, assuming that CRGs will pick up where youth group left off may provide initial relational connection but may not be the place that encourages spiritual development and faith/life integration. Parents need to have ongoing conversations about their students and CRGs to asses whether they are helping or hindering their spiritual development.

What Evangelical Students Need to Know about Their Spiritual Journeys at College

One of the goals of this study was to give voice to those Evangelical students who have experienced spiritual struggle while attending a public university. I have been humbled by the trust and transparency offered to me by these students, as they shared their very personal and complex experiences. I, thus, offer the following considerations to Evangelical students and their friends who share the same religious tradition, live in a similar university setting, and have experienced similar spiritual struggles.

Struggle is normal, even necessary. Many students were troubled that they struggled for fear of being unfaithful, or they were worried that their struggles would cause tension with their friends, family, and parents back home. Remember that spiritual struggle is a necessary part of any spiritual growth and development. One cannot grow without struggle, and these experiences that students have are likely true acts of faithfulness, not unfaithfulness. When struggle is hard,

remember that there is a positive side of struggle where, and once through it, you will not only find relief, but new possibilities.

You are not alone. Students admitted feeling alone as they navigated through their struggles. At one level, spiritual struggle is a very personal experience to address. At another level, however, students can be reminded that there are others who struggle like they do, trying to make sense of their faith and purpose in life. While it can often feel more natural for students to turn to peers or try to work out their struggle alone, remember that there are adults in your lives to whom you can turn for support and that there are more resources on your campus than you may realize.

Part of working through spiritual struggle is seeking new resources. Some students expressed feeling stuck in their spiritual struggles and not knowing how to integrate new ideas or experiences with their religious teachings. Some students suspended this tension by not addressing it or postponing the effort needed to work through their struggle. In these moments, seek out and ask people outside their regular relationships to help them work through the spiritual struggle they are experiencing. A counselor, advisor, professor, religious leader from a different church or organization, or a new classmate may give new, helpful insights. For Evangelical students, branching out can sometimes be scary because many have been told that the university is hostile toward their faith. However, this study revealed inspirational stories of individuals on campus offering significant support and guidance to these students.

Leave church, but find community. Evangelical students have been told that if they are not involved in a CRG or a church, that they may become unfaithful. Students from this study admitted feeling guilt over the choices they made to remain faithful by *not* attending campus groups or churches that conflicted with their maturing faith. Understand that sometimes leaving a

community is an act of faithfulness. This, however is not the end, but the beginning of a journey

toward communities that encourage and support the spirituality you want to nurture.

Find ways to reflect on your spirituality. During this project, students shared very

personal details about their lives, spirituality, and spiritual struggles. These students said they

appreciated our interview conversations, but also admitted that I was one of the few, or even the

only person, they had talked to about these things. Seek out support by finding adults with whom

you can share your spiritual journeys and who can make regularly scheduled time for you to

reflect on your spirituality while at college.

Limitations and Further Study

The intent of this study was to understand the spiritual struggle experiences of

evangelical students on one campus. Further comparative studies are needed to see if the findings

apply to other campus contexts including region and type of school. Additional research on

students who come from other religious traditions may also allow for the comparing and

contrasting of experiences. The findings also beg more questions about the practices of churches,

campus religious groups, and families who send their children to college and support them

throughout their college experiences.

Conclusion

Undergraduate student spiritual struggles on campus are common and indeed necessary

for personal spiritual development and holistic development that leads to maturity, but these

struggles are often unseen or misunderstood by educational and religious leaders, leading to a

lack of support and even detrimental effects on the students who are experiencing such struggle.

The purpose of this study was to compile and understand Evangelical undergraduates'

descriptions of their spiritual struggle experiences. The findings of this current study revealed

that Evangelical students' religious tradition affects their perceptions of their campus, spirituality, education, and spiritual struggle. Most students described the factors affecting their struggle as on-campus factors, even though they sought resources to work through that struggle using off-campus factors. A closer look to consider the forms of that struggle and the spiritual development of these students brought to light how their perceptions of spiritual struggle – the factors affecting their struggle and the resources they accessed –differed based on either a separating or integrating perspective. Students who held a separating perspective struggled with preserving the faith they inherited and found support through Campus Religious Groups (CRGs). Those who held an integrating perspective struggled with guilt from having branched out from the traditional Evangelical expectations to find support through their academics, different churches, and more diverse groups on campus. Most of the students commented on how they appreciated their interviews, and that taking the time to reflect upon and talk about their spiritual experiences during the course of the study was rare for them. Thus, there is an ongoing need for more research to better inform universities and churches of their students' spiritual quests to remain faithful. More research and greater understanding can assist universities, campus religious groups, and churches to be more supportive contexts where students can spiritually mature and faithfully live more integrated lives.

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