This descriptive comparative study describes the spirituality of college students at different levels of moral development. The researcher used a convenience sample from a small liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States. Forty undergraduate students ranging in age from 17 to 22 years (M = 19.39, SD = 1.09) completed the Defining Issues Test short form (Rest, 1986) and the Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (Hatch, 1998) to assess moral development and level of spirituality, respectively. This research failed to indicate significant difference in spirituality among those with high moral development (M = 100.55, SD = 11.39) and with low moral development (M = 96.80, SD = 9.56). Though spirituality did not differ according to moral development, the two variables positively correlated, r (39) = .35, p = .03, indicating that those with higher levels of moral development also reported greater spirituality. Future research should investigate spirituality at each level of moral development (not just high and low morality).

In this study, the researcher examined the spirituality of college students at different levels of moral development by utilizing a descriptive comparative design. Both variables are difficult to define and even more difficult to assess.

Gibson (2004) categorized spiritual maturity in four levels of development, following chronological age. In the first level, a person seeks to accommodate God’s law (Gibson, 2004). Respecting and obeying God’s law constructs the basis of the second level. An individual creates and centers principles on a Christian commitment in the third level. Finally, a kingdom-centered commitment accomplished by the individual develops in the final level.

Similarly, Fowler (1986) identified six stages of faith paralleling different chronological ages: intuitive-projective faith, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and the rarely attainable and final universalizing faith stage. Gibson and Fowler both sought to define faith development in a series of stages from relatively unreflective, concrete thinking in early childhood to more abstract, principled thinking attained in adulthood.

Several researchers have explored the importance of spirituality within college-aged students. Students in college represent a particularly important sample since it is in college that 17- to 22-year-olds practice and hone their abstract, deductive reasoning skills. College can also represent times of crisis or choice for those students who are just beginning to practice their values in light of increasing autonomy and freedom in choice.

Richter (2001) found a significant correlation between spiritual well-being and psychological well-being among college students. Bernt (2004) observed similar connections in his study on the spiritual development of undergraduate students when he found that religious commitment strongly correlated with volunteer activity and altruistic behavior. As spirituality and overall life satisfaction seem to be positively related (Chamberlain and Zika, 1988), it is reasonable to hypothesize that this satisfaction may also relate to moral decision-making and development among college students.

Not only have researchers developed an interest in the area of spirituality among students, but many studies have investigated the topic of moral development among undergraduate students. Windsor (1999) reported that adult professionals use different moral reasoning skills when compared to
novice students. Factors such as age, years of professional work, and level of education appear to be related to the internalization of ethical principles that govern moral decision-making at high levels of moral reasoning. Although students may not exhibit the level of moral development found in professionals, collegiate institutions often expect students to develop morally throughout their tenure on campus (Mathiasen, 2005).

Snarey (1987) provides a thorough recap of Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development in his own study on the cultural variances in moral development. Similar to Gibson (2004) and Fowler (1986), individuals in Kohlberg’s first stage make decisions of right and wrong based on obedience to rules and fear of punishment. By stage two an individual makes “deals” with God or others in authority in order to receive benefits of some kind. Decisions confirm the expectations and ideals related to the individual by others in stage three. Stage four focuses on fulfilling the laws and duties of society for the sake of the laws, but does not focus on the motives or intentions behind the laws. In stage five, individuals make moral decisions based on considering the more abstract qualities of life, liberty, and the reasons behind why a law is enacted or upheld. Stage six seems rarely attainable and reflects the universal morality principle, present in the individual able to take all possible perspectives. Thus the decision of right and wrong is never a means to some moral end, but an end in and of itself.

Tsujimoto and Nardi (1978) compared Kohlberg’s theory to Hogan’s five dimensions of moral character, which consist of moral knowledge, socialization, empathy, autonomy, and ethical attitude. Tsujimoto and Nardi (1978) suggest that combining Kohlberg’s cognitive approach to decision-making and Hogan’s approach to moral character describe the breadth of moral expression in individuals.

Holley’s study (1991) demonstrates that although spirituality and morality demonstrate a close relationship, one cannot classify an individual’s moral development based on his or her level of spirituality. This suggests that spirituality and moral development remain independent of each other. However, Young, Cashwell, and Woolington (1998) found that spirituality positively correlated with moral development and purpose in life. Other researchers, such as Crysdale (2002), have even suggested that authentic moral development requires Christian conversion, spiritual reformation, and individual reexamination.

Motet (1978) researched moral development and spirituality with the intent of incorporating the six stages of moral development into Christian education. He identified parallels between the development of a Christian life and morality, thus supporting research that suggests that spiritual development is related to moral reasoning.

The purpose of the current study is to assess the relationship between levels of spirituality and levels of moral development through a comparison of college students with low levels of moral reasoning to those with higher levels of spirituality. As past researchers (Holley, 1991; Young, Cashwell, & Woolington, 1998; Crysdale, 2002; Motet, 1978) have suggested, moral development relates strongly to spirituality. Specifically, it is hypothesized that individuals at higher levels of moral development will demonstrate greater spirituality than those at lower levels of moral development. It is also hypothesized that spirituality will positively correlate with moral development. Moral development remains an important factor in societal success. If this study confirms a relationship between moral development and spirituality, Christian education may become an essential tool in preparing young people for the post-collegiate world.
Method

Participants

The researcher used a convenience sample of 40 undergraduate students (21 female, 12 male, 7 unreported) who volunteered to participate in a research night at a small liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 22 years (M = 19.39, SD = 1.09). Only 33 participants fully completed the demographic portion of the survey. Of these, 32 participants classified their race as white, and one other participant reported race as bi-racial. Within the sample, religious affiliation varied (2 non-denominational Christian, 26 Lutheran, 1 Catholic, 3 Reformed, 1 provided no response).

The researcher divided the participants into two groups based on their scores from the Defining Issues Test (DIT) short form (Rest, 1986). The 20 highest DIT scores (M = 42.00, SD = 10.28) formed the high morality group, while the 20 lowest DIT scores (M = 17.69, SD = 8.08) formed the low morality group.

Instruments

The researcher used the Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (SIBS, Hatch, 1998) to measure the spirituality of the participants and the Defining Issues Test–short form (DIT, Rest, 1986) to measure moral development of the participants. The SIBS (Hatch, 1998) contains a Likert scale response format. Examples of items on the SIBS include, “In the future, science will be able to explain everything.” Items require participants to respond on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Other items respond to a Likert scale ranging from 1 (always) to 5 (never) and respond to phrases such as, “When I wrong someone, I make an effort to apologize” (Hatch, 1997). After the reverse scoring of several items, the researcher summed the total of the numerical responses on a ratio scale: high scores reflect a high level of spirituality; low scores reflect a low level of spirituality. The SIBS demonstrates strong test-retest reliability (r = .92) and a high correlation (r = .80) with the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Hatch, 1997). A Cronbach’s Alpha determined that the spirituality measure demonstrated good internal consistency among the 26 items of the SIB with this sample (a = .86).

To assess moral reasoning, I used the DIT short form (Rest, 1986), which presents three different scenarios in which the participant must choose the best solution from three choices. The participant then responds to a series of 12 statements by considering the importance of each statement in making the correct decision. The answers range from no importance to great importance in response to questions such as, “Isn’t it only natural for a loving husband to care so much for his wife that he’d steal?” (Rest, 1986). The responses to the queries require assessment that places each participant into a stage of moral reasoning. The test-retest reliability for the DIT scores consistently high (r = .70 to .80), and in comparison to the full form DIT, the short form correlates (r = .91 to .93) with the full form (Windsor, 2000). Researchers have used the DIT as a consistent and accurate tool to assess moral development in many studies. To create comparison groups, the researcher split the scores of the participants into high and low groups. The top 20 scores become the high moral development group, and the bottom 20 scores become the low moral development group so that the high and low levels can be measured on spirituality.

Procedure

Potential participants received information about the study through fliers on the college campus. After the participants entered the room, they received instructions to read an informed consent, to sign two copies if they agreed to participate, and to return one to the researcher. The informed
consent explained the topic area of the study, the duration and location of the study, information about the researcher, the rights of the participant, and procedures used to assure anonymity and confidentiality. This helped to control for subject reactivity and social desirability. After all of the participants took their seats with their surveys, the researcher guided the participants through the “Heinz and the Drug” scenario of the DIT. This helped to clarify the instructions of the DIT and to prevent experimenter bias, which can arise if participants do not fully understand the survey and therefore ask several questions during the test. No further communication between the participants and the researcher occurred after this point.

The participants remained blind to the hypothesis so that subject reactivity could not confound the study. After participants completed the surveys, they brought their completed surveys to the researcher, who in turn handed them debriefing statements that explained the hypothesis of the study, noted where results would be posted, and provided additional information about how to learn more about the topic.

Results

The researcher hypothesized that individuals at high levels of moral development would demonstrate greater spirituality than those at low levels of moral development and that a relationship would be present between moral development and spirituality. The descriptive comparative data showed that the low moral development group reported a mean spirituality score of 96.80 (SD = 9.56), and the high moral development group had a mean spirituality score of 100.55 (SD = 11.39).

This research demonstrated no significant difference, t(38) = -1.28, p = .27 (two-tailed), in scores for the high moral development group (M = 100.55, SD = 11.39) and the low moral development group (M = 96.80, SD = 9.56). The differences in the means had a small effect size (eta squared = .05). However, the researcher noted a significant, positive correlation between SIBS and DIT scores, r(39) = .35, p = .03.

Discussion

Though the results of the study failed to support the initial hypothesis related to differences between high and low groups of moral reasoners, individuals at high levels of moral development did demonstrate greater spirituality than those at lower levels of moral development as evidenced by the correlation. The positive correlation (r (39) = .35) serves to support the previous research on spirituality and moral development from Young, Cashwell, and Woolington (1998), Crysdale (2002), and Motet (1978), who noted significant relationships between spiritual and moral development.

Several limitations of this study serve to caution the reader when making conclusions based on the data. This study utilized a small sample size, and the comparison groups were composed of even smaller numbers of students. The participants were enrolled at a Christian college, and as such they may have felt pressure to respond to questions reflecting their faith in certain stereotypical ways. This study also failed to compare the spiritual and moral development of students within Christian versus non-Christian faiths.

Despite these limitations, the positive correlation of spirituality and moral development among college students might serve to encourage Christian colleges to not only train their students spiritually but also help them reason at higher moral levels, thus eventually bridging the natural gap between faith and moral action.
Spirituality and Moral Development

References


