

Exploring the Enactment of Spirituality at Workplace**Sania Zaheer Ali, Humera Manzoor, and Wisal Ahmed***Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat***Usman Ghani***Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar***Abstract**

Workplace spirituality is of interest to the organizational scientists since many years. But substantial research on workplace spirituality is conceptual in nature. Hence, theories developed through these conceptual papers can be misleading if they are not backed by empirical research. The aim of this research paper was to embark on a qualitative empirical research to explore how spirituality is enacted at workplace; how it can enhance the experience of employees; and what are the factors which foster workplace spirituality. The ontological stance is subjective and epistemological stance is interpretivist. Data was collected through semi structured narrative interviews from 25 employees working in the head office of a not-for-profit organization. Finding shows that spirituality is enacted in the emerging themes of strong leadership, strong organizational culture, value driven nature of work and humanism. It contributes theoretically by empirically exploring factors like trust and respect, symbolic leadership and strong organizational culture as the constituents of workplace spirituality and methodologically by studying the subjective depth of workplace spirituality through narrative interviews which has also been the call of many researchers.

Keywords: Workplace spirituality, qualitative inquiry, not-for-profit organizations.

Research on spirituality has gained momentum in the recent years (Saks, 2011; Zsolnai, 2011) mainly due to the shift from mechanistic to non-mechanistic approach in the management theories. The scientific management theories in the earlier 20th century made people work like machines and had no place for human aspects that were later discovered through the human relations school of thought (Bolton, 2005). The historical significance of this school of thought cannot be undermined since it led modern theorists to investigate phenomena like “spirituality” that has largely been ignored in the conventional literature (Rego & Cunha, 2008; Bhatia & Arora, 2017; Milliman & Gatling, 2017; Zou & Dahling, 2017). Additionally, the outcomes of the pressure of globalization, such as, tough competition, pressure at work, instrumentalism of professional relationship, greed, lack of compassion and love leading to corporate scandals have significantly affected organizational efficiency, growth and reputation, thereby compelling researchers and practitioners to think about complex human aspects in organization, including “workplace spirituality” (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Workplace spirituality is yet in its formative stage, but many positivist researchers can be found studying its antecedents and outcomes, such as, its impact on job related attitudes, work engagement, and job commitment (e.g. Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Rego & Cunha, 2008, Saks, 2011; Malik, Shamin & Ahmad, 2017; Petchsawang & McLean, 2017); however, the phenomenon itself is not clear and requires exploration instead (Gatling, 2015).

Further, research on workplace spirituality is mainly conceptual in nature. Hence, theories developed through these conceptual papers can be misleading if they are not backed by empirical research (Miller & Ewest, 2013; Sorakraikitikul & Siengthai, 2014; Bhatia & Arora, 2017). Moreover, the current literature lacks academic rigor since most of the research is anecdotal, fragmented, lacks consensus, and descriptive in nature (Rego & Cunha, 2008, Houghton, Neck & Krishnakumar, 2016; Tackney *et al.*, 2017). Finally, this study was conducted in the context of not-for-profit organizations that are considered to be highly spiritual in nature. People working in such organizations are often not motivated by profits *per se*, rather they are motivated to get internal

satisfaction and to devote their labor in order to benefit wider society and thus derive a meaning from their work (Kazempour *et al.*, 2016). Also, previous research on workplace spirituality has been conducted mainly in industries, schools, banks and predominantly in the healthcare whereas not-for-profit sector has been largely ignored (Blaike, 2009; Weitz *et al.*, 2012; Houghton, 2016; Kazempour *et al.*, 2016). This study, therefore, particularly aims to contribute to the present body of literature theoretically, methodologically and contextually.

Theoretically it aims to contribute to the present body of literature by telling about the “what” and “how” of spirituality, which according to Houghton *et al.* (2016) after revisiting the landmark paper on workplace spirituality by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002); is yet to be explored. Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) directed the researchers that instead of looking for unanimous definition of the subjective notion like workplace spirituality, researchers should find about the “how” and “why” of workplace spirituality. Therefore, this study aims to explore how spirituality can be enacted at workplace and how it can enhance the experience of employees at workplace. Methodologically, qualitative study has been suggested as to be the most appropriate one to address the subjective nature of the workplace spirituality (Schmidt-Wilk, Heaton, and Schmidt, 2011; Ali *et al.*, 2016; Houghton *et al.*, 2016) and to serve as the foundation or “guardrail” for further development as called by Tackney (2017, p.1) which can then be tested by scholars from the positivist school of thought. Embarking on a qualitative study using narrative interviews is a methodological contribution of this study. Also, exploring spirituality in a not-for-profit organization, which has been ignored in the previous studies (Pawar, 2009; Kazempour *et al.*, 2012; Weitz *et al.*, 2012; Houghton *et al.*, 2016), is the contextual contribution of this study.

The paper is structured as follows: it begins with a brief and concise literature review, followed by the description of the context of the study, and then research methodology has been elaborated. Lastly, findings of the study are reported and the paper ends with discussion, conclusion and future research avenues.

Literature Review

Workplace spirituality is based on the notion that people work with their hearts and spirits and not mechanistically with mind alone (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). It is defined as “the experience of employees who are passionate, enthusiastic and invigorated by their work, those who find some meaning and purpose in their work, and who feel that they are themselves at their work” (Kinjerski & Skrypnik, 2004, p.27). The rigorous literature review on workplace spirituality suggests that research on this area can be broadly categorized into two main underlying theoretical perspectives: religious perspective and non-religious perspective (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Religious perspective assumes spirituality to be “faith at work” which means that there is a strong connection of a human being with God and people learn and understand from God’s will through guidance from religion (Naylor, 1996). On the other hand, workplace spirituality from the non-religious perspective relates to personal philosophy and values beyond the formal rules of a religion and conversion of people to a specific belief system (Brown, 2003; Rego & Cunha, 2008; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Shinde & Fleck, 2015; Houghton *et al.*, 2016).

The non-religious perspective stresses that spirituality and religion are distinct from each other and is beyond an institutionalized religion (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002; Sheep, 2006; Gatling, 2015; Schneider *et al.*, 2015; Petchsawang & McLean, 2017). It is about *spirit* and spirit does not require membership of any religious institute rather it is based on ideal virtues of humanity referring to ethics, morality and meaningful work (Brown, 2003; Sheep, 2006; Rego & Cunha, 2008; Gatling, 2015). There is a possibility that an individual might be spiritual person without being part of a religious community or any particular religion (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). It is about encouraging people to bring their entire selves to work (Voci, 2000). Researchers fear that amalgamation of religion into workplace can lead to proselytism (i.e. a particular religion dominates and forces people to adhere to its principles) (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). It can also lead to ‘*self-righteousness*’ i.e. a certain religion is superior to others, thus aggravating negativity rather than resulting in positive workplace behavior (Gatling, 2015).

In the same vein, researchers argued that spirituality can be discussed at the workplace, but religion is an inappropriate topic for discussion in the workplace (Alas & Mousa, 2016). This

shows that a straightforward theoretical stance becomes complicated since both reflect the meaning of life and search for higher power, which is confusing (Sorakraikitikul & Sengthai, 2014). Another stream of researchers argue that religion cannot be eliminated while studying workplace spirituality; though, religion could not be taken as an essential component required to develop spirituality (Howard, 2002). Yet, another group of researchers are of view that they both are same (Kazempour *et al.*, 2016). This confusion is normally held when a phenomenon is not well developed and, thus, requires in-depth investigation (Howard, 2002). According to Karakas (2010), there are more than 70 definitions of workplace spirituality but as there are numerous theories and models over which there is lack of consensus over how it is formed or enacted (Tackney *et al.*, 2017). The problem is not only limited to the lack of conceptual clarity but also because organizational scientists are still not sure whether workplace spirituality exists independently, or it is an aspect of already recognized phenomena such as religion (MacDonald, 2011). Since this study has been conducted in Pakistan and religion is a dominant factor in the lives of people living in the East. Therefore, this study took a stance that existence and occurrence of workplace spirituality is not inevitably related to religion, but it can be a good approach for introducing spirituality (Wen & Chen, 2012).

Context of the Study

A not-for-profit organization named *Akhuwat* Foundation was the context of the present study. It is a not-for-profit organization with 695 branches located all over Pakistan, which grants interest free micro finances to the poverty stricken. It is a highly spiritual organization and due to its spirituality, many employees have switched from other jobs where they were suffering from what has been called by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) as “*existential sickness*” i.e. lack of meaning in work and they are happily working in this organization. This attracted the attention of researchers and thus it was deemed suitable as the context for the study. Head-office was selected for the data collection since the policies and procedures are formulated at the head office.

Research Methodology

Substantial research in the domain of workplace spirituality is dominated by the positivist researchers. Tackney *et al.* (2017) claim that it raises numerous issues both at epistemological and ontological levels. Due to its very objective nature and strict boundaries to follow certain procedures like questionnaires, the positivist paradigm limits the development of new knowledge (Schumacher, 1997) as it restricts the understanding of inner, subjective depths of spirituality (Schmidt-Wilk *et al.*, 2011). Data has been collected through narrative interviews that addresses the call of current researchers (e.g. Tackney *et al.*, 2017) as narratives helps to gain access to the lived experiences of respondents (Riessman, 1993; Czarniawska, 2004). Analysis in narrative studies opens up forms of telling about experience (Czarniawska, 2004); hence, it was considered suitable in the context of present study. At workplace individuals work in groups and on the basis of organizational values, culture and environment give meaning to their work and thus socially construct their reality.

A snow ball sampling technique was used. It is used when it is difficult to identify the members of desired population (Saunders, 2011). Semi structured narrative interviews were conducted from 25 employees through face-to-face interviews that ranged from 40-45 minutes. Questions in the topic guide were prepared such that they did not guide the research outcomes and thus keeping the essence of exploratory research intact (Tierny & Lincoln, 1997). Participants were encouraged to open up by telling their “*story*” and thus to get rich narrative about the meaning of their work. For instance, they were asked questions like, “*what gives you pleasure at work?*” and were probed with questions like, “*can you give an example? Like a situation or an event*”. This was then additionally appropriate to maintain the internal validity, also one of the strengths of the qualitative approach (Richie *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, they were asked, “*How would you relate spirituality at workplace?*”, “*What makes you feel connected to your workplace?*”, “*Can you please give an example?*”, “*In your opinion, what do you think are the reasons that makes you feel spiritual at workplace?*” Which was then probed with “*can you please share any event or story?*”. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using narrative analysis. First

order codes were identified which were then categorized into themes and identical themes were clustered into thematic categories (Riessman, 2008).

Findings

Findings show that spirituality is enacted, constituted and embedded in four different ways: it is embedded in organizational culture; Symbolic Leadership; religion, humanity and ethics; and in value driven nature of work

Workplace Spirituality Embedded in Organizational Culture

All the employees at not-for-profit organization came up with the conventional economic mindset to work and earn a living. As one of the senior managers said:

“When I joined this organization, my thinking was different. I came as head of internal audit, so I was thinking that okay, “I am not getting job and as long as I don’t get job I will use this job as a parking lot and as soon as I get an opportunity I will go ahead”.

He further added:

“I didn’t know what is Akhuwat? How does it work? I knew it is a microfinancing organization, but I dint knew what kind of microfinancing. I was thinking they must be involved in conventional microfinancing but when I came they said we are doing interest free microfinancing. I could not believe it. How is it possible?”

Since it is commonly believed about organizations working under the umbrella of non-for-profit organizations to be for-profit actually. Employees working in the organization lacked trust in the organization initially, but then with the passage of time when they actually become a part of an organization with a cause and where the mission and vision of the organization were actually followed, they began to have emotional encounters. Their emotional encounters in the field inculcated into them emotions of empathy.

“My encounter with her moved me from inside... that what kind of work (job) is it? It is a job and it is a help... help of our people”

They were happy that they are into a job which was not fulfilling their basic economic needs but also their higher order needs of transcendence. Involving in the work with a strong sense of community made their work meaningful. This was only possible with strong environment which supported the organizational philosophy. As one of the participant said about spirituality that:

“Every person possesses it...aaahh all that is needed is to connect it to the right place... a right click... if you get an environment, then it gets more refined and comes up with a glory”

This meant that every person is spiritual and all that is needed is suitable environment to make it active. This was very much consistent with definition of workplace spirituality by Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) who also implied that workplace spirituality is based on organizational values evinced in the culture that stimulates employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of joy and completeness and joy. As one participant said that:

“Organization really changes your way of thinking”

Furthermore, he said:

“So, organization definitely inculcates this into you, it helps you (aaaaahm) to achieve (aaaaahm) your aim in life, helps you get a meaning in life. I am talking about Akhuwat (not-for-profit organization) ...this does not happen in commercial line...”

This sense of connectedness was very interestingly found to be sustained and maintained through the storytelling which fostered individuals’ experience of workplace spirituality. Employees were continuously made to internalize the fact that they were doing something which was worthy for them as well as in the wider context of society.

Moreover, it was found that there was no communication barrier in the organization. Employees were regularly communicated by bosses and seniors and were asked about any problem

if they were facing while working. Likewise, there was a considerable level of respect and trust relationship among employees. As one of the female employees with a pride and shine in eyes exclaimed:

"Even our bosses call us Madam (smile). They never call us by our names. We feel so happy then...we cannot express our happiness when we get so much of respect. Our colleagues at branch are so good to us...we are very lucky".

They were found to be happy for the trust factor between employees and management, as one of the participants said:

"Right now, I am giving you interview, I am not working, no one is going to ask me that why are you sitting idle... I know what my todays tasks are. I will talk to you and then I will do my work...but no one is going to ask me, no one is going to interrupt me that finish your work first. Because we are trusted here...Our bosses know that we will definitely do our work on time. They trust us. If we want to leave quickly or need to take a full day off management understands. They know we might be having something important to do".

Management at Akhuwat knows how spirit at workplace can be fully realized; therefore they empowered and enabled the unfolding of each individual through his or her participation in the work of the organization. All these factors were found to be the ingredients of spirituality in Akhuwat Foundation since all the participants who were interviewed showed same zeal and used same words to express their spirit at work.

Symbolic Leadership

According to Winkler (2010) in symbolic leadership, leader symbolizes values through actions and thus helps provide insights to the followers. Symbolic leadership was also one of the reasons behind the spirituality of employees working in not-for-profit organization. Participants proudly narrated that their spirituality comes from their leader, because he serves as a role model for them and they all want to be like him. Leader speaks to employees in such an inspiring manner that employees' spirit and energy about the noble work rejuvenates after interaction with the leader.

"Dr. Sb says whenever I feel down, I go to the field, I meet people, and that give us strength, and I want to contribute and work more and more... So this (our work) gives us strength".

According to Vickrey (1995), an effective leader instead of manipulating behavior try to exhibit desired activities in such a meaningful manner that they become worthy of doing. They give a sense of meaning to their followers, due to which followers make them a role model and try to be like them (ibid). Finding also shows that at Akhuwat employees learn about the meaning of work from the leader. As one of the participants said about the CEO and founder of the organization:

"I had an opportunity to learn from him what life is?"

Such leadership behavior is also not very different from transformational leadership (Vickrey, 1995). Thus, findings are also coherent with what Burns (1978) stated about transformational leader as the one who is in such a relationship with the followers that motivational and morality level is raised substantially. Another characteristic of transformational leader is that they serve as moral agents and tends to turn followers into leaders (ibid.) this was again witnessed in the context of the study as one of the participants who was also a senior manager said:

"One of my job duties is also to guide my subordinates that this is meaning.... Meaning of meaning work and meaning of life, to help others. I refine my subordinates, I help them understanding what is meaning of life and that in turn gives me meaning; I think this is another aim of my life!"

Thus symbolic/transformational leadership is another factor which was found to foster spirituality at workplace.

Religion, Humanity and Ethics

There is a very much obscure debate on the perspectives of workplace spirituality (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Sheng, 2012; Altaf & Awan, 2011).

According to Kelemen & Peltonen (2005) normative work on spirituality can be classified in two categories: Religious perspective and non-religious perspective. Whereas there is also another group of researchers who claims that spirituality can be viewed from ethical perspective. (See for e.g., Krieger & Hanson, 1999; Milliman, Ferguson, Trickett, & Condemi, 1999). However, the findings of this study come up with another perspective which was lived by people working in the context of this study i.e. humanism. Humanism has also been discussed by Jurkiewicz & Giacalone (2004) in their value framework for work place spirituality, they explained it as, when the individuals know that their work bring greater goodness for humanity, they feel spiritual. They then don't just work for economic reasons rather they work for a cause and the nobleness of the cause make them spiritually significant (ibid.). The same concept has also been referred to as "secular spirituality" by Brown (2003). He argues that spirituality based on human, nature and earth centered principles.

When participants were asked that, why do they feel spiritual at their work? What constitutes spirituality? Is it religion? Since religion is the dominant part of lives in the eastern context so one of the participants answered this question this way,

"Yes, one reason is religion, but it is one of the reasons. It is actually care for humanity, religion and humanity together, and then a person travels to another world (existential) and one contributes more and more".

He then added:

"Believe me this not only belongs to Muslims, this what I am saying that is helping others. Yes, Islam says us to help people, but do you think only Islam says this? No. This also belongs to Non-Muslims; this also belongs to atheists. Yes, religion tells us, but I think this is the foundation of peaceful life. This is beyond religion! (thoughtfully)"

When an individual feel that their work makes them serve others, they are engaged in higher purpose they cannot easily express into words, but that transcendence was witnessed by researcher on their face in the form of happiness and shine in eyes. Kinjerski and Skrypnik (2004) elaborated this by referring to Frankl's theory of transcendence which states that deeper meaning can only be appreciated when one transcends self-interests. It is then not limited or tied within the boundaries of religion. It is beyond it.

Value-Driven Nature of Work

The way organization nourishes shared values among employees, thus creating a unified and motivated human resource is known as value driven organization (Donovan, Tully, & Wortman, 1998). One of the factors which made employees spiritual in the context of the study was the value driven nature of work. One of the employees who was chartered accountant by profession and working with the organization while explaining his reason to work for non for profit organization said that:

"If I was not working at Akhuwat, for example, so what would I have been doing? I would have worked in a bank, in a multi-national. Or in a big corporation. So, what? I would have been working for one person, for his benefit, not for a cause"

Mitroff and Denton (1999) and Ashmos and Duchon (2000) also endorsed value-driven nature as one of the hallmarks of organization which nourish workplace spirituality. At another instance, it has been defined as work which is engaging in such a way that individual believe that they are engaged in meaningful work that is linked to a higher purpose and a person belief that the nature of work is the reason behind the attachment with something which is larger than self (Kinjerski & Skrypnik, 2006b).

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings of the study can be discussed in the light of following contributions made possible by this study:

1. The "What" of Workplace Spirituality?

A landmark study in the field of workplace spirituality was by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) who called researchers to find out empirically about the "what" i.e. various views of spirituality, which according to Houghton *et al.* (2016) is still valid. Giegle (2012) called upon the researchers to sort out the relationship between secular spirituality and religious spirituality. This research answers these questions by adding that religious and secular perspectives of spirituality

are intertwined along with ethics and notion of humanism. In Eastern context religion is always there but if someone is engaged in an act of community or is self at work it is not because of religion, it is because there is a good person in every human being who gets happy by helping others.

Findings shows that though religion is an important part in the life of people who experience spirituality, spirituality is not limited to religion it is about ethics, values and above all it is about humanity which was also conceptualized by Jurkiewicz and Giacalone (2004). If employees feel that they are engaged in work which is for the benefit of humanity, they feel energetic. They feel that they are engaged in work which is attached to existential and thus the goals of individual and organization gets aligned and employees feel spirited at work.

2. Development of Workplace Spirituality in Employees

Giegle (2012) after reviewing literature on workplace spirituality from 2000-2012 and called upon the researchers to answer whether spirituality can be developed in employees? Findings of the present study reveals symbolic leadership as one of the factors which can foster/develop spirituality in the employees. If the leader of the organization is spiritual and mentors the employees effectively, it can lead to development of workplace spirituality in the employees. Similarly, strong organizational culture is one of the factors which enriches employee's workplace spirituality. To summarize when leader actually embodies what they say about the organization it redefines the organizational values and constructs a new sense in the organization. This finding is also a support to Fry *et al.* (2017) who implied that though there is plenty of conceptual work on relationship between leadership and spirituality but there is little empirical support to it. Thus, this research comes up with a strong endorsement that symbolic leadership strongly influences the way employees give meaning to their work.

3. Factors which Foster Workplace Spirituality

This study thus makes a theoretical contribution by adding that by providing with a favorable environment and culture spirituality within employees can be developed. Due to alignment of employees and organizational goals they start owning organization and then they work towards the achievement of organizational objectives such that they are doing it for themselves (Black & Venture, 2017). Employees were found to be a part of strong learning culture where the organizational philosophy, vision and mission and sense of community was frequently reminded through different trainings and meetings with the senior management.

Through the use of storytelling management at the organization actually had effectively utilized a goals-theoretical approach, employees were made to cognize and pursue organizational goals such that those goals were tied to the existentialist and thus gave meaning and purpose to their lives. In this way organizational and individual goals were precisely aligned with each other. Analysis of the narratives shows that organization (*Akhuwat*) is having strong organizational culture which is consisted of humanistic principles which are led by a strong leader and that there is a consistency in the communication and behavior of the people working in the organization which is then embedding those values into all employees through social learning which takes place due to frequent encounters with managers/heads, regular training etc.in turn making them highly spiritual. Houghton *et al.* (2016) argued that there is a paucity of empirical support for *trust* as one of the important factors fostering workplace spirituality, this research is also an empirical support for *trust* as findings clearly indicates that employees builds workplace spirituality on the foundation of trust. They are themselves at work because they are confident that management trusts them, so they do their work their way.

Thus, the aim of this research paper was to embark on a qualitative empirical research to explore how individual working in a not-for-profit organization give meaning to workplace spirituality, how it can enhance the experience of employees and what are the factors which fosters workplace spirituality. Whether spirituality is religious, or secular is an ongoing debate since workplace spirituality has gained attention. Findings of the study concluded with a humanistic perspective of workplace spirituality and that spirituality symbolic leadership, value driven nature of work, strong organizational culture can foster workplace spirituality in employees.

Future studies can look into the humanistic perspective of workplace spirituality in depth, since only Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2009) had minimally referred to the humanistic

perspective of workplace spirituality, it requires further exploration. The findings of this study also recorded many participants narrating that they act spiritually because it is part of being human. Therefore, a further exploration into the perspective can be a very promising contribution to the developing theory of workplace spirituality. Moreover, for an empirical endorsement, the findings of this study can be triangulated with quantitative testing. Also, presence of symbolic leadership can be explored in a not-for-profit organization.

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