A spirited workplace: Employee perspectives on the meaning of workplace spirituality

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ABSTRACT

Although views on the nature of workplace spirituality abound, the meaning of the concept and its relatedness to other organisational constructs are everything but clear. Using a qualitative approach, the current study set out to explore the meaning of workplace spirituality among a group comprising 31 employees of a South African manufacturing concern. The findings derived through content analysis align well with literature perspectives on the phenomenon. The findings however also reveal that employee awareness and understanding of workplace spirituality are limited.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace spirituality is commonly described in terms of an employee experiencing a sense of 'wholeness, connectedness at work, and deeper values' (Gibbons cited in Milliman, Czaplewski & Ferguson, 2003). In practice, however, the meaning of this construct is less than clear and it is often used interchangeably with the phrases 'spirit at work' or 'spirituality at work' (see for example Komala & Ganesh, 2007, p. 124). Notwithstanding this apparent lack of clarity, interest in the notion of workplace spirituality appears to be gaining momentum (Johnson, 2007; King, 2007; McConkie, 2008). This is somewhat paradoxical, for when the term 'spirituality' is raised in business and institutional settings it invariably invokes scepticism. Employees have stated outright that they do not feel safe in expressing their views of spirituality in workplace settings (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002). Bruce (2000, pp. 466–468) also reports a very high proportion of people (74%) who claim to be spiritual in nature and who express the fear that religious beliefs will be forced onto them if spirituality is introduced into the workplace. Propping up the counterargument, Grant, O'Neil and Stephens (2004) argue that their case study results have revealed that the majority of employees in this secular bureaucracy actually believe that their work is spiritual. These employees have indicated that they experience workplace spirituality in a variety of ways and are eager to talk about the phenomenon but struggle to find opportunities to practice their spiritual beliefs. They actually perceive the discussion of spirituality in the workplace as 'unwelcome' (Grant *et al.*, 2004, p. 266). Equally insightful is the observation that executives consistently and clearly differentiated between spirituality and religion (*cf.* Mitroff & Denton, 1999a, p. 86) and that the majority (approximately 60%) of the 100 executives and senior managers interviewed held positive views of spirituality but negative views of religion. About 30% conveyed positive views of both, leaving very small proportions who held negative views of spirituality (2%) and spirituality and religion (8%) respectively. More recently Lund Dean and Safranski (2008, p. 359) reported that employers recognise and in some instances embrace employees' wish for 'soul-enriching fulfilment at work' and have argued that spiritual and religious expression at work (referred to as SRW) has emerged as a 'major organisational paradigmatic shift'. This view is based largely on the extensive coverage of the subject in popular business and press articles that has appeared in *Newsweek*, *Fortune* and *Business Week* (see Milliman *et al.*, 2003).

These often-conflicting sentiments provide a glimpse of the importance and relevance but also sensitivity and controversy that accompany the concept of spirituality in the workplace. Yet, despite this hesitancy, the interest in spirituality in the workplace appears to be increasing, as is evidenced in the work of scholars and among managers and management consultants (Biberman, 2003; Cavanagh, 1999; Daft & Marcic, 2004; Fawcett, Brau, Rhoads, Whitlark & Fawcett, 2008; Grant *et al.*, 2004; Huang & Kleiner, 2001; Johnson, 2007; Lund Dean & Safranski, 2008). Indicative of this growing interest in the phenomenon of spirituality and workplace spirituality is the variety of perspectives from which the subject has been approached. Most notable is the debate concerning the relatedness of spirituality and religiosity or religiousness, with most publications addressing this topic.

However, more recently attention has been devoted to organisational cultures that embrace and embody workplace spirituality and the incorporation of spiritual values in organisations (Fawcett *et al.*, 2008; Milliman, Ferguson, Tricket & Condemi, 1999; Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999). Workplace spirituality and organisational change are increasingly receiving attention (Heaton, Schmidt-Wilk & Travis, 2004), as do spiritual leadership (Fairholm, 1996; Ferguson & Milliman, 2008; Mitroff & Denton, 1999b; Neck & Milliman, 1994), learning and management development premised on spirituality (Neal, 2008) and spirituality as organisational intervention (*cf.* Lund Dean & Safranski, 2008). To be expected in view of the surge of interest in the subject, the legal and political challenges of attending to workplace spirituality in organisations (King, 2007; Schley, 2008) are also beginning to receive scholarly attention.

The reasons for this surge of interest in workplace spirituality, however, are less than clear, but theories that attempt to account for its rise in popularity nonetheless abound. One of the most commonly argued perspectives is that societal trends are at the root of the growing interest in the phenomenon. These include the demoralising effect on workers of large-scale organisational change programmes such as downsizing, restructuring and re-engineering; the decline in neighbourhoods, churches and communities as places where a sense of connectedness and community can be experienced, which gave

rise to workplaces becoming substitute communities; a growing interest in Eastern management paradigms and philosophies that accord substantial prominence to individual spirituality; a workforce that is aging (especially the baby boomers) and is now seeking greater engagement and more meaningful self-expression in the workplace; and global competitiveness pressures and the belief that spirituality would secure a competitive advantage for companies as it is understood to engage the full potential of the employee (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Burack, 1999; Cash & Gray, 2000; Conger, 1994; Mohamed, Wisnieski, Askar, & Syed, 2004; Zohar & Marshall, 2004). Apart from these reasons Roof (1999), viewing the subject from a sociological perspective, suggests that other modern developments, such as an increasingly need-driven and anxious society, further inform this search for meaning.

Despite the uncertainty that surrounds the reasons for the growing interest in the phenomenon, there seems to be general concurrence, at least at a conceptual and intuitive level, that workplace spirituality offers more benefits than disadvantages. Scholars typically cite a number of expected benefits, both at the level of the individual and the organisation that accrue from the introduction of spirituality in the workplace (see in particular Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). Most of these, it seems, arise from the adoption of spiritual values and beliefs, which then results in the transformation of the individual and hence the workplace and organisational practices (Dehler & Welsh, 1994; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; McCormick, 1994; Neck & Milliman, 1994). Typically, these gains are clustered in the categories of an enriched and fuller life experience at the level of the individual employee, which then leads to a range of outcomes such as improvements in culture, productivity and performance at the organisational level (Burack, 1999; Mitroff & Denton, 1999a). A number of quantitative studies, for example, have found that workplace spirituality is positively associated with employee work attitudes such as organisational commitment, intention to quit, intrinsic work satisfaction, job involvement and organisation-based self-esteem (Milliman et al., 2003), and organisational identification and work rewards satisfaction, and inversely related to organisational frustration (Kolodinsky, Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2008). In a similar fashion, several other studies were undertaken but the operationalisation of workplace spirituality in these studies differed in important ways, which precludes meaningful conclusions.

The generally optimistic view of the value and benefits of spirituality in the workplace observed in the literature is consequently eroded by the paucity of empirical research on the subject. It is also in the absence of adequate empirical research that uncritical perspectives on the phenomenon gain momentum. A few scholars have, for example, indicated that prevailing perspectives on the workplace spirituality phenomenon tend to understate the equally important 'negatives' of the phenomenon, for example exploiting or manipulating employees through the unobtrusive system of control created by efforts to establish workplace spirituality (Biberman & Coetzer, 2005; Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006). Except for the occasional study (e.g. the seminal work of Mitroff & Denton, 1999a, 1999b) research on workplace spirituality to date has largely been of a conceptual, theoretical and quasi-empirical nature, with empirical research on workplace spirituality notably in short supply (Lund Dean, 2004; Lund Dean & Safranski, 2008; Mohamed et al., 2004).

In the absence of substantive research it is hardly surprising to find that there is no commonly accepted definition of workplace spirituality or spirit at work (King, 2007; Tischler, Biberman, & McKeage, 2002) and that a clear operational definition of the construct is lacking (King & Crowther, 2004; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004). In fact, one of the most salient observations emerging from the literature is the concurrence among scholars that definitional clarity on what spirituality in the workplace or spirit at work entails is still lacking (Butts, 1999; Garcia-Zamor, 2003; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004; McConkie, 2008). This is not

for want of definitions or attempts at defining the construct, as virtually every scholar has attempted to articulate the meaning of workplace spirituality, spirit at work or organisational spirituality with the result that measures (and implicit operational definitions) abound (King & Crowther, 2004; McCormick, 1994; Mohamed et al., 2004). The diversity evident in the multitude of definitions of spirituality actually contributes to confusion and frustration and precludes rigorous comparison of research results (MacDonald, 2000; Mohamed et al., 2004). The difficulty in defining spirituality, some argue (Mohamed et al., 2004; Neal, 1997), arises from the subjective nature of the construct and the inability to categorise it.

From the preceding, it would seem that the growing interest in the field of SRW is premised on a weak scientific foundation (especially empirical research). The notion of workplace spirituality or spirit at work is substantially under researched – a situation not helped by the abundance of definitions in use. The majority of these definitions lack clarity and confound rather than assist and ultimately create measurement difficulties as different authors tend to measure different aspects of what they believe are spirituality constructs. Of specific interest to the current study is Kinjerski and Skrypnek's (2004) observation that spirit at work at the level of the individual employee has received very little research attention thus far. They argue that such research should be initiated at the level of the individual and should commence with the search for a comprehensive and measurable definition of the construct (p. 29). Kinjerski and Skrypnek's study, however, focused on 14 professionals who were involved in the notion of spirit at work but did not focus pertinently on the employee level. The current study consequently will speak to this area of inquiry and explore the meaning of workplace spirituality at the level of the worker or employee.

The research question consequently is concerned with the salient meaning parameters that employees attach to the notion of workplace spirituality. This can be operationalised as 'What meaning do employees attach or ascribe to the term workplace spirituality?' In pursuing this research focus, the study aims to establish the current level of awareness and understanding of workplace spirituality at this level of the organisation. A secondary consideration is to establish whether and to what extent empirically derived meanings ascribed to workplace spirituality align with theoretical conceptualisations of the concept.

To this end, the discussion leads with a brief overview of the design and methodological parameters of a qualitative study through which the meaning parameters of the spirituality construct in a local manufacturing setting was explored. The empirical observations drawn from the 31 respondents are then analysed and contrasted with perspectives emerging from relevant literature. The discussion concludes with a brief consideration of the constraints and implications of the research as well as avenues for continued research.

RESEARCH DESIGN
Approach to the research

Spirituality is generally perceived to be a personal and intra-personal phenomenon. Workplace spirituality, which is more appropriately ascribed to the collective than the individual, is construed and enacted through the perceptions and cognitions of individual employees during social interaction with one another in an organisational setting. While some common understanding should be evident, ultimately the meaning of the phrase will vary from person to person. It is a function of a variety of factors including how the person perceives, interprets, and internalises the meaning of situations. The meaning of workplace spirituality is entirely dependent on those who constitute the organisation and how they tend to view and communicate this phenomenon (i.e. a socially constructed phenomenon). From this position the phenomenon is likely to

be more a result of members' (employees') actions than they may recognise (Morgan, 1997). Ontologically, this approach fits Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) constructivist paradigm and Burrell and Morgan's (1979) interpretive sociological research paradigm (which are often combined – Creswell, 2003; Esterberg, 2002). This is consistent with the research question, which seeks to determine the meaning of workplace spirituality from the perspective of the employee and which characterises the research as exploratory and inductive. Epistemologically, knowledge of the workplace spirituality phenomenon can be found in what Dixon (1999) refers to as the tacit 'meaning structures' of the employee, that is, the cognitions, feelings and associations of the individual employee. This will manifest in the employee's narrative (statements, comments or expressions), for example in response to broad open-ended questions on the subject. A compatible methodology should engage and listen to employees to generate rich data that will allow detailed study of participants' narratives and enable the extraction of relevant meaning as it pertains to the subject under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This is best obtained in a naturalistic setting where the phenomenon is 'lived' and reified by employees. Data so obtained will eventually produce a descriptive account as well as generate some understanding of how spirituality at work is conceptualised by employees in a manufacturing concern.

Research strategy

The current study aimed to explore the meaning that employees ascribe to the construct 'workplace spirituality'. This characterises the study as essentially an interpretive activity and unambiguously locates it in the domain of qualitative research. However, while the focus of the study on the phenomenon of workplace spirituality is clear, the choice of research strategy is less obvious. The field of qualitative research characteristically reflects a methodological plurality and an extensive range of interpretative activities, which according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 6) 'privileges no single methodological practice over another' yet it is also regularly characterised by 'tensions and contradictions' (p. 8). The choice of an inquiry strategy may well entail a consideration of anything from five to 28 research strategies, which all fundamentally aim to gain a deeper understanding of some phenomenon (*cf.* Creswell, 2003, p. 183). As the current study was primarily descriptive and concerned with the meaning parameters of employees' daily lived experiences of the phenomenon (*cf.* Creswell, 1998; Sousa, 2008), in this instance workplace spirituality, a phenomenological tradition, was selected as the strategy of inquiry. Here the focus was more pertinently on exploring the convergent and divergent meanings that emerged when a group of employees provided their descriptive accounts of the phenomenon. A phenomenological inquiry that engages a single individual or case would not enable an appropriate response to the research question. Such use of a number of cases to study a phenomenon or more general condition, referred to as a multiple or collective case study (Stake, 2005) or multisite qualitative research (Herriott & Firestone, 1983), fits in with the varied applications of phenomenological inquiry in use (Creswell, 1998; Sousa, 2008).

Research method

Research setting

A manufacturing plant located in the Gauteng region of South Africa and a division of a large multinational organisation in the food and beverages industry constituted the research setting for the current study.

Entree and establishment of researcher roles

Permission to conduct the study was sought and obtained from the Human Resources Manager and management team. The purpose of the study was clarified in correspondence with the management and thereafter with the staff and again during the one-on-one and group meetings with employees. From the onset it was indicated to management and later to respondents that

participation was voluntary, that respondents would remain anonymous and that information would be treated in strict confidence. Moreover, the respondents knew the researcher through her role as internal Human Resources consultant and this ensured optimum participation by employees in the department.

Sampling

Using purposive sampling 31 employees, spread over three hierarchical levels in the manufacturing plant, were identified. This ensured diversity in terms of position, line function, age, race, gender and years of service and consequently solid prospects for obtaining diverse (and indeed common) views on the meaning of workplace spirituality.

Although representative sampling is less important in qualitative research, pausing to reflect on the profile of the respondent group tends to be useful when considering transferability and confirmability of findings (Drisko, 2005). In terms of gender, respondents were evenly distributed with men comprising 52% and women 48% of respondents. The sample was slightly skewed towards management (50% and 13% were middle and senior management respectively) and English as home language, with 74% of respondents English speaking, while Afrikaans and African languages represented 16% and 9% respectively. With regard to age the majority of the respondents, 64%, were aged between 36 and 50 years, followed by 29% who fell within the 22–35 years age range. The majority of the respondents had between one and five years service (48%), with 29% residing in the 6–10 years service bracket. The largest proportion of the sample had progressed beyond high school education to obtain a three-year diploma (42%), while 16% had obtained a B-degree and 13% an honours degree, suggesting a reasonably educated participant group.

Method of data gathering

Central to the study was the focus on narrative, a form of social action characterised by common properties, structures, conventions and genres (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, p. 825) and the primary vehicle (or evidence) for exploring the meaning parameters of workplace spirituality. Documents and text, an embodiment of narrative, derive their significance from the socially organised properties they possess and the (powerful) purposes for which they are utilised (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005 p. 825). Moreover, Holstein and Gubrium (2005, p. 485) have asserted that 'ordinary language is the *modus operandi*' and that the meaning of a word (in the natural attitude) relates principally to what it references. Proceeding from this premise a structured interview schedule was developed to obtain verbatim (written) narrative from respondents. This method was consistent with the 'written open-ended surveys' that Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004, p. 30) employed in their exploratory and descriptive study that engaged 14 professionals on the meaning of spirit at work. Four basic open-ended questions were included, which required respondents to indicate their familiarity with the notion of workplace spirituality, to outline what they understood the phrase to mean and to indicate whether they thought it was important. The last item provided them with the opportunity to add any other comments.

Measures to ensure data quality

Data quality was optimised firstly through the method of data gathering. Respondents provided written narrative in response to the four key questions posed to them and did so in their own handwriting. The data were then transferred immediately to an electronic medium and the capturing of verbatim responses was checked by an associate for accuracy in capturing and presentation. Respondents were allocated brief pseudonyms (e.g. respondent R10) that were indicated on the completed (anonymous) questionnaires and captured with the data.

Procedure

On the prearranged day for conducting the research and after briefing respondents on the purpose and structure of the interview schedule (and that written narrative was required), the schedule was handed out to the respondents. It was again brought to the respondents' attention that they were under no obligation to participate but that should they decide to do so, confidentiality would be maintained. The protection of their anonymity and privacy was reaffirmed. This entailed, *inter alia*, that pseudonyms (rather than their names) would be used in the transcriptions of the narrative. They were also assured of feedback upon conclusion of the study and an open invitation was extended to participants to contact the researcher should questions arise at a later stage. To facilitate sense making the collected raw data were collated (captured) and transferred into an easily readable form (*cf.* Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) with the purpose of extracting key themes, using basic content analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1992).

Analysis of the data

Qualitative data analysis consists of a continuous iterative process of data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), often performed through what is referred to as content analysis. To this end, it should be noted, as Holstein and Gubrium (2005, p. 485) assert, that 'words and categories are the constitutive building blocks of the social world'. Content analysis consequently aims to engage and interrogate the social world through the narrative (words and text) provided by respondents. Although a time-consuming and exhaustive process that requires both convergent and divergent thinking (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994), content

TABLE 1
Illustrative excerpts of respondent views on the meaning of workplace spirituality

RESPONDENT NO.	STATEMENT PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, 'WHAT IS MEANT BY WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY?'
Familiar with phrase: **'Yes'**	
1	'Recognition of a higher self – in ourselves and all others and realising the role of spirituality at work.'
9	'The way you conduct yourself in the workplace to support others and making decisions to the higher good of all and the environment.'
13	'I think it refers to the values and ethical culture of the workplace. It talks to how people relate to each other spiritually at work and how they are led. A spiritual workplace would have a sense of purpose greater than just producing a product or providing a service; the job and the workers would have something deeper and people would feel a spiritual connection and a greater sense of meaning in what they do and in their relations.'
Familiar with phrase: **'Not sure'/'Uncertain'**	
11	'Humane people like to create, living out their passion without fear. It also creates an atmosphere of trust and honest communication.'
22	'My understanding is religion/theology and religious studies. "Workplace spirituality" would be working together and respecting other people's beliefs and religion.'
27	'I think it refers to being spiritual at work but also not imposing your spiritual beliefs on other people. We have to be respecting of other people's beliefs while remaining true to our own religions.'
Familiar with phrase: **'No'**	
6	'Spirituality means understanding your conscience. Thus workplace spirituality looks at how you utilise the same theory in your work environment, in your daily activities at work.'
14	'Religion and culture.'
31	'You refer to people who believe in their religion and culture.'

analysis remains the preferred method for analysing narrative. This was the selected vehicle for analysing the descriptive statements on workplace spirituality and was performed in accordance with the constant comparative method as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, pp. 126–148). This method aims to bring to the fore unique units and patterns of meaning and essentially entailed inductive category coding and simultaneous comparison of units of meaning across categories. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 249), a better understanding of a phenomenon is arrived at when objects (e.g. the semantic units of meaning) are grouped and further conceptualised on the basis of similar patterns and characteristics. Repeated sorting of data into patterns (an inductive method) enables higher levels of abstraction and commences with the identification of small units of meaning in the data, which then serves as a basis for establishing and defining more encompassing categories of meaning. Following this practice, the narrative obtained from the respondents was transcribed verbatim, line-by-line, and read several times to form a holistic understanding of the collected data. The main ideas that emerged were then written down and recurring regularities in the data noted as themes or preliminary categories. A phrase or a sentence was used as the semantic unit of analysis. These units of meaning were then compared to the provisional categories and where they corresponded, they were allocated common codes and clustered together (belonging to the same category), while those that differed were allocated 'new category' status and a new code. This process was repeated for all the data obtained from the respondents. The system of categories (meaning) so arrived at was then inspected for patterns and relationships among these patterns.

The coding process enabled organisation and quantification of the data/observations for subsequent interpretation. Data categories were refined through an editing style that entailed the researchers noting comments in the margins of the text and subsequently reconsidering or recoding earlier observations if so suggested by these comments. Illustrative excerpts of a random selection of participant responses are indicated in Table 1. Responses are sorted on the basis of participants' reported familiarity with workplace spirituality.

FINDINGS

The observations emerging from the current study are briefly reported in terms of the respondents' awareness of workplace spirituality and the meaning parameters they ascribed to the phenomenon. As a further consideration, respondents' assessment of the importance of workplace spirituality is briefly entertained.

Employee perspectives on the meaning of workplace spirituality

In response to the question assessing respondent awareness of (familiarity with) the phrase 'workplace spirituality', 13 respondents (42% of the sample) indicated that they knew the phrase while 12 (39%) were unfamiliar with it. Six (or 19%) expressed ambiguity in terms of the phrase (e.g. they used expressions such as 'Not sure', 'I think...' or 'Not completely') but nonetheless attempted to describe what they thought the phrase referred to. This was also true for those who denied any knowledge of workplace spirituality. These attempted descriptions were taken into consideration and coded in terms of the same (emergent) codebook but were kept separate during analyses.

Key concepts or terms that consistently surfaced in the brief narratives provided by respondents across the different response categories ('Yes', 'Not sure' or 'No') were identified and, as a first step, the frequency of their occurrence was noted (see Table 2).

The contents of Table 2 alert us to the conceptual domains and specifically the constructs that employees select to construct meaning (or 'meaning structures' – *cf.* Dixon, 1999) around the

TABLE 2
Recurring concepts and phrases in employee-provided meanings of workplace spirituality

CATEGORY	PHRASES/CONCEPTS	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE		
		'YES'[a]	'NOT SURE'[b]	'NO'[c]
Self-oriented descriptors				
Self	'yourself', 'higher self', 'soul', 'conscience', subconscious mind'	6	3	2
Purpose	'sense of purpose', 'meaning', 'knowing where you're going', 'higher purpose'	11	-	1
Self-fulfilment	'fulfilment', 'enjoyment', 'happiness', 'satisfaction'	2	-	3
Beliefs	'beliefs', 'spiritual beliefs', 'religious beliefs', 'balance beliefs'	9	4	2
Values	'respect', 'dignity', 'honesty', 'humane', 'loyalty', 'commitment'	6	6	-
Emotions	'emotions', 'feelings', 'uplift people's spirits'	5	1	5
Conduct (self)	'being spiritual', 'meaning in what they do', 'something deeper', 'making decisions for the higher good'	8	-	-
	'living out', 'expression', 'doing'	3	-	-
	'coping', 'less stressed', 'without fear'	2	2	-
	Subtotal (self-oriented)	52	16	13
Socially oriented descriptors				
Conduct (towards others)	'knowing', 'understanding', 'recognition', 'acknowledgement', 'ethical', 'acceptance'/ 'accept', 'tolerance', 'helping', 'supporting', 'giving more'	15	7	1
	'relating'/'relations', 'connecting'/'connectedness', 'linkage'	7	-	-
	'togetherness', 'working together', 'team work'	3	3	-
Other	'other', 'people', 'colleagues', 'employees', 'all'	14	9	5
	Subtotal (socially oriented)	39	19	6
Other descriptors				
Religion/faith	'religion', 'religious', 'faiths'	2	3	7
Culture	'culture', 'atmosphere'	2	2	3
Workplace	'workplace', 'work', 'job', 'work environment'	15	5	9
TOTAL RESPONSES		**110**	**45**	**38**

Note: Of 31 respondents 13, 12 and 6 respectively indicated that they were familiar with, unfamiliar with and uncertain of the meaning of the phrase workplace spirituality.
[a]Respondents who indicated that they were familiar with the workplace spirituality concept. [b]Respondents who were ambiguous about the meaning of the concept . [c]Respondents who denied any familiarity with the meaning of the concept.

TABLE 3
Metatheme 1: Workplace spirituality shapes the 'inner world' of the employee

THEME	STATEMENT PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, 'WHAT IS MEANT BY WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY?'
Metatheme (pattern) 1: Workplace spirituality brings about a qualitatively different inner world and inner state in the employee compared to employees in workplaces where there is no spirituality. Workplace spirituality does the following:	
Theme 1.1	enhances self-insight and awareness in respect of self and others.
	'recognition of a higher self – in ourselves and in all other...' [sic] (R1); *'means understanding your conscience'* (R6); *'how one feels about oneself'* (R23); *'to understand and find peace within themselves to be able to connect to fellow workers'* (R26); *'an understanding and acknowledgement of work colleagues'* (R12)
Theme 1.2	provides meaning and a sense of purpose.
	'people find meaning through spirituality' (R9); *'the workers would have something deeper...and a greater sense of meaning in what they do'* (R13); *'...making decisions to the higher good of all'* (R9); *'sense of purpose beyond coming to work for 8 hours'* (R4)
Theme 1.3	engages the employee more holistically and completely. Embraces the employee's beliefs in the divine and cultivates a commitment to humanistic values.
	'...relates to your spiritual path' (R1); *'people come to work with their spirituality/spiritual beliefs'* (R3); *'...'spirituality' is just one aspect that makes up the whole 'being''* (R20); *'understand their spiritual beliefs'* (R3); *'respecting of other people's beliefs while remaining true to your own religion'* (R27)
	'the ability to respect each other and be honest with one another' (R10); *'respecting and understanding each other'* (R29); *'a way of expressing more humanity'* (R11); *'it is important to have respect, dignity, and honesty as part of one's values in the workplace'* (R22)
Theme 1.4	creates a positive state of mind and induces positive affect in the employee.
	'affects an individual's outlook on their work as well as their co-workers and interactions with them' (R23); *'people who work for companies they consider to be spiritual are less fearful, more ethical and more committed'* (R11); *'contributes to personal happiness'* (R21); *'have peace and tranquillity in their souls'* (R26); *'allows one to enjoy coming to work'* (R10); *'it brings some form of peace and harmony'* (R5)

Note: Excerpts are from written narrative provided by respondents (respondent identity indicated in parentheses).

notion of workplace spirituality. These concepts and phrases do not provide a clear indication of how these constructs relate to one another, i.e. how meaning is derived. As a second procedure, themes were extracted on the basis of larger semantic units (beyond concepts/phrases). These not only indicated that the meaning of the phrase workplace spirituality is embedded in a number of themes but further suggested a number of metathemes or metacategories within which the extracted themes could be clustered. Responses to the question 'What does spirituality in the workplace mean or refer to?' accordingly revealed that workplace spirituality is perceived as a phenomenon that shapes the 'inner world' of the employee (metatheme 1), that is enacted in the workplace (metatheme 2) and which impacts on the employee and the workplace (metatheme 3).

From the narrative of this group of respondents, workplace spirituality (metatheme 1) is seen as bringing about a qualitatively different inner world and/or state of mind in the employee compared to employees in workplaces where there is no experienced or enacted spirituality. It enhances self-insight and awareness in respect of self and others and provides meaning and a sense of purpose for the employee. Moreover, it is seen as a phenomenon that engages the employee more holistically and completely and that, more specifically, embraces the employee's beliefs in the divine and cultivates a commitment to humanistic values. Moreover, workplace spirituality creates a positive state of mind and induces positive affect in the employee. Excerpts from respondent narratives that are illustrative of this metatheme are provided in Table 3.

Whereas metatheme 1 suggests that workplace spirituality shapes and alters the inner world of the employee, metatheme 2 indicates that workplace spirituality is also and in particular about the employee enacting and positively expressing this (altered) inner world. This metatheme reflects how the employee acts and interacts with others in a broader social context, which includes enacting his or her belief systems. It is, however, also about contributing beyond the normal call of duty. At the same time, respondent views portray workplace spirituality as engendering a heightened social awareness and orientation in employees and manifesting in employee interaction that is markedly

TABLE 4
Metatheme 2: Workplace spirituality is about enacting the employee's 'inner world'

THEME	STATEMENT PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, 'WHAT IS MEANT BY WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY?'
Metatheme (pattern) 2: Workplace spirituality is about the employee enacting and positively expressing the employee's (altered) 'inner world'. It reflects how the employee acts and interacts with others in a broader social context. Workplace spirituality...	
Theme 2.1	is about employees enacting their inner world and belief systems, without hesitation.
	'the way we express our spirituality at work' (R8); 'living out their passion without fear' (R11); 'how people relate to each other spiritually at work' (R13); 'free to express yourself' (R15); 'the manner in which we live out our spirituality at work' (R16)
Theme 2.2	is about.... contributing.
	'suggests giving of "myself" beyond just my skills and services to the organisation' (R4); 'sense of purpose greater than just producing a product or providing a service' (R13); 'helping each other' (R2)
Theme 2.3	reflects a heightened social awareness and orientation in employees and manifests in employee interaction that is markedly appreciative and accommodating of others.
	'understanding and acknowledgment of work colleagues' (R12); 'the way you conduct yourself in the workplace to support others' (R9); 'tolerate different cultures in the workplace; get to know each other well' (R15); 'the way we interact with each other ethically' (R16); 'not offend each other unintentionally' (R16); 'respecting other people's beliefs' (R22); 'not imposing your spiritual beliefs on others' (R27)
Theme 2.4	facilitates a sense of connectedness and relatedness.
	people would feel a spiritual connection' (R13); 'use your subconscious mind to connect with everything'(R26); 'how they show their linkage with other departments' (R24); 'you can connect by accepting other faiths and their spiritual upbringing in the work environment' (R26)
Theme 2.5	instils a sense of community in the employee.
	'togetherness, respect and dignity' (R2); 'how colleagues feel about themselves and each other and how we all work together' (R12); 'working together as a team' (R15); 'working together and respecting other people's beliefs' (R22)

Note: Excerpts are from written narrative provided by respondents (respondent identity indicated in parentheses).

appreciative and accommodating of others. A central theme that is closely associated with the latter is that employees perceive workplace spirituality as facilitating a sense of connectedness and relatedness as well as a sense of community in the employee (see Table 4 for illustrative examples of narrative).

The third metatheme indicates that respondents generally ascribe a meaningful influence and consequences to workplace spirituality, which they perceive as causal outcomes of the enacted inner world of the employee. These outcomes most often assume the form of a gain or achievement. Workplace spirituality, for example, positively enhances employee coping and well-being, contributes to employee functioning and performance, influences and directs workplace interaction and conduct, and shapes the culture and atmosphere of the workplace/work environment. Table 5 provides illustrative excerpts of respondent narrative in support of these themes.

In addition to the identified themes and metathemes, respondent narrative indicated further themes that characterise this group's perceptions of the phenomenon, which did not align as powerfully with the metathemes. The first relates to the (difficult) challenge of balancing spiritual beliefs and work requirements – a consequence of intertwining what is traditionally regarded as separate life domains (the work environment and the private

TABLE 5
Metatheme 3: Workplace spirituality is perceived to impact on the employee and the workplace

THEME	STATEMENT PROVIDED IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, 'WHAT IS MEANT BY WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY?'
Metatheme (pattern) 3: Workplace spirituality has a meaningful influence and consequences, which are perceived as causal outcomes of the enacted inner world of the employee. These outcomes most often assume the form of a gain or achievement. Workplace spirituality positively...	
Theme 3.1	enhances employee coping and well-being.
	'that helps balance the pressure and demands of the day to day living' (R9); 'contributes to personal happiness' (R21); 'the peace/stress one feels in the working environment' (R21); 'being fulfilled in understanding and doing my purpose' (R4)
Theme 3.2	contributes to employee functioning and performance.
	'has a direct impact on an individual to perform better' (R10); 'can improve performance and bring out more from individuals' (R11); 'is important for the success of the business through having people perform at their best' (R18); 'equips you with the means to be able to do your job better' (R28)
Theme 3.3	influences and directs workplace interaction and conduct.
	'informs how you treat people' (R1); 'if people do not have a sense of peace and spirituality in the workplace they will become negative and demotivated' (R12); 'tolerate different cultures in the workplace' (R15); 'boosts morale in the team' (R16)
Theme 3.4	shapes the culture and atmosphere of the workplace/ work environment.
	'creates an atmosphere of trust, and honest communication' (R11); 'creates a good work environment' (R12); 'creating a spirit and energy that is unique to your workplace' (R26); 'may uplift people's spirits' (R27); 'a good concept that can enhance the work ethic' (R5)

Note: Excerpts are from written narrative provided by respondents (respondent identity indicated in parentheses).

or personal spiritual life of the employee). One respondent, for example, indicated that employees *'are always trying to balance their spiritual beliefs with what the workplace requires of them'* (respondent R3), while another stated, *'You want to gain "alignment" and understand how your work relates to your spiritual path'* (respondent R1). Congruence between personal, more spiritual values and work activities or organisational values is important for it creates meaning for the individual employee – a construct placed at the centre of the phenomenon of workplace spirituality (Driver, 2007).

The second theme concerns the equation of spirituality with religion. This is in part an artefact of employees' different levels of familiarity with the workplace spirituality concept. Note in this regard also the high incidence of 'religion' terminology among those who, reportedly, were not familiar with the concept and the low incidence of this among those who indicated that they were familiar with the concept (see Table 2). Several respondents raised this issue and some (largely those who reported being unfamiliar with the concept) demonstrated this confusion. Workplace spirituality accordingly was described as follows:

'… who believes in any religion or culture' (R29)
'Religion in the workplace' (R7)
'… may mean a place where one can retire to for religious needs' (R17)
'… religion in the workplace – it can also mean people's (employees') spirit (emotions) within the workplace' (R18)
'… having a good spirit – not necessarily religion based' (R25)
'People must use their spirit at home or at their church.' (R30)
'I believe we don't need anyone's culture or religion. This is about business ...' (R31)

The sentiments conveyed by respondents R30 and R31 appear to echo the earlier observations about the scepticism that surrounds the notion of workplace spirituality (e.g. Bruce, 2000).

TABLE 6
Selection of contemporary definitions of spirituality

AUTHOR	DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY
Driver (2007, p. 612)	'…the search for meaning at work with meaning referring to the experience of a connection to a higher purpose'.
Fairholm (cited in Neal, 2008, p. 380)	'One's spirituality is the essence of who he or she is. It defines the inner self, separate from the body, but including the physical and intellectual self.... Spirituality also is the quality of being spiritual, of recognizing the intangible, life-affirming force in self and all human beings. It is a state of intimate relationship with the inner self of higher values and morality. It is recognition of the truth of the inner nature of people'.
Heaton, Schmidt-Wilk and Travis (2004, p. 63)	'… "pure spirituality" to refer to a silent, unbounded, inner experience of pure self-awareness, devoid of customary content of perception, thoughts and feelings'. ... "applied spirituality" to refer to the domain of practical applications and measurable outcomes that automatically arise from the inner experience of "pure spirituality"'.
Johnson (2007, p. 427)	'…a means to provide meaning in one's life, to foster growth and development, and to establish connectedness and community, thereby helping individuals see that they are a part of something bigger than themselves'.
King (2007, p. 105)	'… is a "search for the sacred", a process or journey by which the individual examines life, its meaning and purpose, and the overall effect that one has on others and the environment, including the organization'.
Koenig, McCullough and Larson (2000, p. 18)	'... is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred of transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community'.
Lips-Wiersma and Mills, (2002, p. 185)	'... is connoted with daily personal integration and applications of deeply held values such as humility, integrity or service'.

TABLE 7
Selection of contemporary definitions of workplace spirituality

AUTHOR	DEFINITION OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY
Ashmos and Duchon (2000, p. 137)	'The recognition that employees have an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in context of community.'
Dehler and Welsh (1994, p. 19)	'A specific form of work feeling that energises action.'
Gockel (2004, p. 158)	'... covers a broad range of phenomena, experienced both within and outside of a formal religious tradition, which centers on a personal experience of the sacred and one's connection to it, to others, and to life itself in the context of workplace.'
Harrington, Preziosi and Gooden (2001, p. 155)	'Spirituality at work is not about religious beliefs. Rather, it is about people who perceive themselves as spirited beings, whose spirit needs energizing at work. It is about experiencing real purpose and meaning at work beyond paychecks and task performance. Spirituality is really about people sharing and experiencing some common attachment, attraction, and togetherness with each other within their work unit and the organisation as a whole.'
Marques (2006, p. 885)	'The awareness that interconnectedness, respect and recognition are not limited to ourselves and our environment but are also very much applicable to all those with whom we work on a regular or incidental basis, in such a way that these qualities can lead to more than mere enhanced enjoyable workplace circumstances but to increased return on investments as well.'
Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004, p. 27)	'… describes the experience of employees who are passionate about and energized by their work, find meaning and purpose in their work, feel that they can express their complete selves at work and feel connected to those with whom they work.'
Komala and Ganesh (2007, p.125)	'Spirit at work is "a distinct state that is characterized by physical, affective, cognitive, interpersonal, spiritual, and mystical dimensions"...' 'Drawing on Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004, they more specifically circumscribe the phenomenon as "... a physical sensation characterized by a positive state of arousal or energy; positive affect characterized by profound feeling of well-being and joy; cognitive features involving a sense of being authentic, an awareness of alignment between one's values and beliefs and one's work, an interpersonal dimension characterized by a sense of connection to others and common purpose; a spiritual presence characterized by a sense of connection to something larger than self, such as a higher power, the Universe, nature or humanity; and a mystical dimension characterized by a sense of perfection, transcendence, living in the moment, and experiences that were awe-inspiring, mysterious, or sacred."'

A third and less prominent theme articulated the meaning of workplace spirituality in terms of the *employee's identity and identification with his or her work and organisation*. Respondent R4's statement, '*It also involves being recognised by the organisation for who I am, and not for what I do*', is illustrative of the former while the identification dimension is highlighted by the comments of respondents R20 and R26: '*... how happy you are with the work you do and how well one identifies with it*' (R20) and '*... something to your soul that you identify with*' (R26).

In general, the identified themes convey clear meaning patterns for this employee group. The observed meaning patterns (see Tables 2 to 5) in some respects reveal substantial parallels with the extant knowledge base yet also deviate in other respects. It is notable that the metathemes convey a sentiment of experiencing and enacting or doing – two of the methods through which the individual is able to derive meaning in life (*cf.* Frankl, 1959). This largely reflects the different knowledge levels among employees with regard to workplace spirituality. In the discussion section, these observations are briefly compared to existing conceptualisations of workplace spirituality as reported in the literature.

Perceived importance of workplace spirituality

Although the 'yes'/'familiar with' and the 'no'/'unfamiliar with' responses on workplace spirituality (13 and 12 responses respectively) were evenly balanced, a generally more optimistic sentiment is conveyed with regard to the importance of workplace spirituality. In this regard 18 respondents (or 58%) indicated 'yes'/'important' while only four respondents (13%) stated 'no'/'unimportant'. This general optimism is noteworthy

yet also perplexing as it includes several respondents who indicated that a phenomenon of which they knew little or nothing is important. Generally though, the reasons advanced for the importance of the phenomenon stem from the perceived positive influence and impact that is assumed to accrue from incorporating spirituality in the workplace (see Table 5 for the perceived gains and positive influence of workplace spirituality). This is consistent with the general belief that positive gains can be derived from workplace spirituality (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002; Mitroff & Denton, 1999a).

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to establish employees' awareness and understanding of workplace spirituality as well as the degree of alignment of empirically derived meanings with theoretical conceptualisations of workplace spirituality.

When the findings of the current study (themes in Tables 3 to 5)

are compared with the content parameters of a random selection of definitions of spirituality (see Table 6) and workplace spirituality (see Table 7) a substantial degree of alignment is observed.

The collective view of workplace spirituality as it emerged from the respondent views is largely consistent with the 'common' elements of spirituality and workplace spirituality. These are the search for meaning and purpose, a sense of wholeness, a sense of connectedness and community at work, the experience of deeper values, and beliefs that are aligned/consistent with the values of the organisation (Milliman *et al.*, 2003; Mitroff & Denton, 1999b). However, no individual respondent's views completely capture what are considered emergent common themes of the workplace spirituality phenomenon. This is consistent with, for example, Mitroff and Denton's (1999a) observation that nearly every interviewee in their study included most of the elements of the spirituality construct. This finding is unsurprising as spirituality was traditionally viewed as a personal matter not to be discussed in the workplace (King, 2007). Knowledge and understanding of spirituality within organisations furthermore have not advanced because of the tacit avoidance or marginalisation of such topics and subjects by management scholars (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006; Mohamed *et al.*, 2004, p. 102 refer to scholarly 'neglect' and 'intellectual bias'), the result of which is the notable absence of spirituality constructs in organisational and management theory. This position, however, is being challenged by notable empirical research in this domain, in particular the seminal work by Mitroff and Denton (1999a; 1999b).

Employees' limited understanding of workplace spirituality, however, also manifests in the confusion of religion and spirituality in their responses. Respondents who confirmed their familiarity with the workplace spirituality concept were less likely to equate workplace spirituality with religion, religiosity or religious values, compared to those who were unfamiliar or less familiar with the phenomenon. The latter consistently equated spirituality with religion. This, too, is a very common trend, which may account for the regular discussions of this relationship in the literature (McConkie, 2008). There is some merit in the intuitive association of the two constructs as some argue that the identities of the two constructs overlap and hence imply an interrelatedness of the two constructs (Hill & Smith, 2003; King, 2007). Part of the observed confusion stems from the similarities between or conceptual overlaps of the two constructs, to the extent that both constructs '… suffer from definitional murkiness' (McConkie, 2008, p. 338). This becomes a substantive pragmatic concern when many respondents claim to be both spiritual and religious (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Mitroff & Denton, 1999a). The conceptual domains of both religion and spirituality, for example, at their core focus on meaning (Hill & Smith, 2003) and the nature of life (extending beyond physical life) both acknowledge the existence of an ultimate being or power, or God (Burgess in Harrington, Preziosi & Gooden, 2001).

Against this, contemporary views (Cacioppe, 2000; Conger, 1994; Harrington *et al.*, 2001; King, 2007; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002) seem to differentiate spirituality from religion on several grounds:

Religion, it is argued, is embodied in established beliefs in the past and some notion of a 'systematised truth' and organised theologies and doctrines about man's destiny (past and eternal) in relation to self, others and God or a divine being. It is rooted in a specific set of formal beliefs, values and principles. These are typically embedded in a morality frame or perspective and are associated, among other, with symbols, the observance of prescribed religious practices and rituals, holy days, and dress codes. It is faith-based and not subject to the requirements of scientific endeavour.

Spirituality is more personal, pragmatic and less definitive. It is often described as an enduring quest for meaning and purpose in life, and is concerned with the daily integration and application

of deeply held values such as humility, integrity, and service. It is typically perceived as being/extending beyond a specific religious denomination (refer also to Tables 5, 6 and 8).

The conceptualisation of spirituality and religion in the literature, as briefly outlined, would suggest that the observed confusion of meaning parameters among employees is to be expected. However, at an applied level this would pose problems, and interventionists endeavouring to advance the notion of workplace spirituality would be well advised to carefully consider the definitional challenges of these closely related constructs.

A second consideration relates to the interchangeable use of the concepts workplace spirituality and spirituality (or spirit) at work. Most scholars would refer to workplace spirituality but discuss spirituality in the context of the workplace or environment. While this is by far the most common approach, Kolodinsky *et al.* (2008, pp. 265–266), for example, have argued that at least three different perspectives on workplace spirituality are evident from scholarly reports:

- Workplace spirituality as the application of personal spirituality in the workplace, i.e. the transfer of individual spiritual ideals and values to the work setting.
- Workplace spirituality as organisational spirituality, i.e. the organisation's spiritual values (the individual employee's perception of).
- Workplace spirituality as *interactive workplace spirituality*, which entails the interaction of the individual employee's personal spiritual values with the spiritual values of the organisation.

Although the validity of Kolodinsky *et al.*'s (2008) typology has not been subjected to rigorous testing, it nonetheless suggests that further refinement of concepts and theory frames is needed. Notwithstanding this status, respondent data in this study (see Tables 3 to 5) appear to align with Kolodinsky *et al.*'s first approach or category, i.e. the transfer of personal spirituality concepts to the workplace. This then also suggests that concepts of workplace spirituality observed among the employees of this institution are in their infancy and bound to become more sophisticated with time and in concert with the evolution of the workplace culture in the participating organisation. The latter appears to be at a rudimentary stage and the result of the limited awareness of employees.

Conceptual clarity with regard to the workplace spirituality construct in itself, however, remains a challenge (Harrington *et al.*, 2001; McConkie, 2008) and it is improbable that a commonly accepted (agreed) meaning for the concept will be established soon. Indeed, it is questionable whether a universal definition of the construct is attainable or, more importantly, desirable, given the multiplicity of perspectives on the construct and the value accorded to such diverse conceptualisations (*cf.* Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002; Lund Dean, 2004). Definitions, however useful, in and of themselves do not represent the central focus of the phenomenon. Mitroff, for example, has argued that complete and final definitions are in the majority of cases not possible and are often the outcome rather than the starting point of research (*cf.* Lund Dean, 2004). While this perspective is fundamental to the purpose of the current study (and eventually reflected in its findings), it is equally valid to argue, as Mohamed *et al.* (2004, p. 103) have done, that definitions of spirituality are likely to be more incomplete than incorrect. This was also demonstrated at the applied level as, in the current study, no single respondent provided an adequate description of workplace spirituality (using literature-based perspectives as gauge – see also Tables 6 and 7). Empirical research, however, is needed to reveal the inadequacies of scientific and applied perspectives and will invariably accentuate and crystallise the conceptual boundaries of the construct. In this regard only a few studies have been conducted that provide empirical comment directly and/or indirectly on the meaning parameters of workplace spirituality. The findings of the current study are consequently briefly contextualised in terms of some of the reported empirical studies.

In what is arguably one of the more robust and comprehensive empirical studies on spirituality, MacDonald (2000) administered a composite survey-based instrument with 20 psychological measures of spirituality to two groups of undergraduate students, representing 534 and 938 students respectively, and subjected the results to factor analysis. The factors so extracted *de facto* provided an operational definition of the spirituality construct. Spirituality, accordingly, encapsulated five dimensions (MacDonald, 2000, p. 187 in particular). These factors or dimensions were (corresponding themes from the current study are indicated in parentheses)

- *cognitive-perceptual expressions of spirituality*, which include beliefs, attitudes and perceptions regarding the nature and importance of spirituality (see themes 1.1, 1.3 and 2.1 in Tables 3 and 4 and the majority of the themes in Table 5, which encapsulate the employee's *beliefs* about the positive influence of spirituality);
- *experiential expressions of spirituality*, which include spiritual, religious, mystical peak, transcendental and transpersonal experiences (refer to themes 2.4 and 2.5 in Table 4);
- *existential well-being*, which is expressed through a sense of meaning and purpose (see themes 1.2, 1.4, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1 and 3.2 in Tables 3 to 5);
- *beliefs in paranormal phenomena* of a psychological nature (this dimension did not surface in respondent narrative); and
- *religiousness*, which entails religious beliefs and attitudes and religious behaviour and practice (see in this regard individual statements in support of themes 1.3, 2.4 and 2.5 in Tables 3 and 4 and commentary on the religion-spirituality relationship).

Similar convergence is observed when the findings of the current study are compared with the key observations obtained from 33 senior management members (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006, pp. 52–53). These authors observed that spirituality for the respondents meant expressing feelings of love and appreciation and eliminating fear from the workplace (compare with themes 1.3, 2.1 and 2.3 in Tables 3 and 4); a sense of connection (and interdependence) with the inner being, colleagues and the universe (refer to themes 2.4 and 2.5, Table 4) and acknowledging the 'whole person' at work (refer to themes 1.3 and 2.2, Tables 3 and 4); a sense of meaning and purpose beyond themselves (refer to theme 1.2, Table 3) and placing people before profit, viewing work as a calling and serving others (see themes 2.2 and 3.3, Tables 4 and 5); and enacting a small set of core values, specifically honesty (being authentic and truthful), sacred communication (e.g. emphatic listening), fairness, excellence and celebration (see themes 1.3 and 3.4, Tables 3 and 5).

Although the qualitative nature of the current study does not allow precise categorisation and fair comparison, the extracted themes juxtaposed against the dimensions reported in the mentioned studies reveal a substantial degree of convergence. Comparison with other empirical studies using both qualitative and quantitative research approaches (refer to Table 8) confirms this observation.

Inspection of Table 8 reveals a high degree of alignment between the findings of the current study and those of the cited empirical studies. Of these, the study by Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004) can be accentuated as it was in many respects similar to the current study (in focus, design and methodology). What is

TABLE 8
The meaning of workplace spirituality (WS): Comparison of findings (themes) from selected empirical studies and the current study

FAIRHOLM (1996, P. 12)	MITROFF AND DENTON (1999A, P. 89)	KINJERSKI AND SKRYPNEK (2004)	MOHAN AND UYS (2006)	THE CURRENT STUDY
Survey, respondents not stated	Interviews with 88+ executives	Surveys and interviews with 14 spirituality professionals	Interviews with 10 middle to senior management professionals	Survey involving 31 employees (managerial and non managerial)
Characteristics of spirituality	**Key elements of spirituality**	**Themes/dimensions of spirit at work**	**Emergent themes**	**Emergent themes on workplace spirituality**
• An inner conviction of a higher, more intelligent force	• Not formal, structured or organised	• Physical experience: Physiological arousal and energy	• Relationship with higher beings	• WS shapes the inner world of the employee
• The essence of self that separates humans from animals	• Nondenominational, above and beyond denominations	• Affective experience: Positive affect characterised by well-being and joy	• Making sense of life	o Enhances self-insight and awareness in respect of self and others
• What humans rely on for comfort, strength and happiness	• Broadly inclusive, embracing everyone	• Cognitive experience: Authenticity, alignment and making a contribution	• Acknowledging and nourishing the inner world	o Provides meaning and a sense of purpose
• The part of us searching for meaning, values, life purposes	• The ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose in life	• Authenticity: Expressing oneself completely at work	• Living authentically	o Engages the employee more holistically and completely; Embraces the employee's beliefs in the divine and cultivates a commitment to humanistic values
• A personal belief system	• The awe we feel in the presence of the transcendent[a]	• Alignment: Congruity between one's values and beliefs and one's work	• Finding meaning and purpose through work	o Creates a positive state of mind and induces positive affect in the employee
• An emotional level, a feeling	• The sacredness of everything, the ordinariness of everyday life	• Making a difference: A belief in work as a higher purpose	• Our relationship with other people	• WS is about enacting the employee's inner world
• The acting out in thought and deed of the experience of the transcendent in human life	• The deep feeling of the interconnectedness of everything	• Interpersonal experience: Sense of connection to others and common purpose	• Living a balanced life	o Is about enacting the inner world and belief systems without hesitation
• A personal relationship with God	• Inner peace and calm	• Spiritual presence: Awareness of connection to something larger than self	• Organisations as spiritual entities	o Is about contributing
	• An inexhaustible source of faith and willpower	• Mystical experience: A sense of perfection and transcendence	• Our role in creating the future	o Reflects a heightened social awareness and orientation in employees and manifests in employee interaction that is markedly appreciative and accommodating of others
	• The ultimate end in itself			o Instils a sense of connectedness and relatedness
				o Instils a sense of community
				• WS is perceived to impact on the employee and the workplace
				o Enhances employee coping and wellbeing
				o Contributes to employee functioning and performance
				o Influences and directs workplace interaction and conduct
				o Shapes the culture and atmosphere of the workplace

Note: Basic data gathering methodology and the nature of the sample engaged are indicted in the first row for each of the studies cited.
[a]The authors indicate that while most respondents did not articulate all dimensions indicated here, most endorsed the 'existence of a supreme guiding force' and 'interconnectedness' (p. 89) as the fundamental components of spirituality.

different, though, is that unlike the sample of professionals engaged in the Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004) study, who researched and published on spirituality, the current study engaged managerial and nonmanagerial employees working for the same manufacturing concern, who reported varying levels of awareness and knowledge of the workplace spirituality phenomenon. The consistency of these observations demonstrates that the experience of workplace spirituality is bound to embody similar meaning parameters for a broad segment of the general population.

Implications and recommendations

The high degree of convergence observed between the findings of the current study and those observed for the cited empirical studies strengthens existing knowledge of, and validates the fundamentals of the workplace spirituality phenomenon on the one hand. On the other hand, it also confirms the validity of the findings of the current study. This is a positive note for those who lobby for and wish to engage spirituality in the workplace. However, while the convergence of empirical observations suggests that managers and practitioners could proceed more confidently, the pragmatics of implementing workplace spirituality are everything but uncomplicated. The nature, scope and character of workplace spirituality practices need to account for the divided sentiments (fears and expectations) among employees and in particular the potential legal impact of implementing a phenomenon that is currently characterised as a 'complex legal debate' (Lund Dean & Safranski, 2008, p. 363). The matter is sufficiently complex and significant, to the extent that the Clinton administration in the USA attempted to provide industry guidelines for implementing SRW (King, 2007). The experience base with workplace practices, however, is very lean and legally accepted parameters of implementation are only now beginning to emerge from the rather slow, tedious and costly case law route (King, 2007; Schley, 2008). All this means is that research efforts should expand and intensify and address fundamental and applied perspectives on workplace spirituality.

Avenues for future research

The findings on employees' understanding of workplace spirituality (in the current study) suggest awareness creation and education of key organisational constituencies (management in particular) as a first step to advance SRW practices and to realise the anticipated gains of such practices. However, to attempt to do so in the absence of a credible (scientific) knowledge base will be risky for both the scientific and practitioner communities. Heaton et al. (2004) have recommended more systematic theory-informed but in particular model-based research of a robust and rigorous nature to address the prevailing ambiguity around constructs of work spirituality or workplace spirit. Building on this platform it is argued here that this should now assume the form of systematic empiricism, as the subject is currently beset by conceptual perspectives. Even though this approach implies that science (knowledge) in respect of workplace spirituality will advance incrementally and slowly, this will nevertheless happen in a systematic and coherent manner. Empirical work characterised by careful conceptualisation and designed to build and test theory is more likely to affirm the key meaning parameters of the phenomenon in unambiguous terms and establish reliable and valid measurement approaches, which are necessary to systematically advance the science and practice with regard to workplace spirituality.

Limitations

While the findings of this study echo and validate important meaning parameters of the workplace spirituality construct when compared to those generated by various local and international studies, the findings nonetheless remain context bound. Managers and scientists consequently have to exercise caution when considering the transferability of these findings

to their/other contexts. Moreover, while the data proved useful and illuminating in the form that it was generated, its nature (a function of focus and design) precludes deeper exploration of the relatedness of workplace spirituality to managerial behaviours and institutional culture and practices. These foci should be the subject of further research initiatives of different designs.

Conclusion

The study sought to explore the meaning parameters of workplace spirituality at the level of the employee and did so by engaging a group of co-workers in a manufacturing concern. The findings revealed substantial correspondence with several studies that engaged different research populations. This is encouraging, as it suggests that sufficient consensus is beginning to emerge, with 'sufficient' referring to the level of coherence and continuity needed to convince institutional managers of the potential significance of the phenomenon in the workplace. From this particular vantage point it should be noted that many workplace 'ills' often manifest in the form of neglect of the individual employee and hence neglect of the employee's development and growth. Employee development and growth, however, appears to be a natural by-product of spirituality in the workplace (i.e. workplace spirituality).

A more appreciative and compassionate employee attitude towards co-workers is often pursued through an array of teambuilding interventions, at substantial cost and a time premium to the institution. Workplace spirituality, however, appears (implicitly) to foster such a philosophy among employees with practically no contribution by the institution. Numerous value-inculcation programmes, again at great cost and at best with questionable results, cannot achieve what the implicit value base of spirituality applied in the workplace (e.g. honesty, fairness and compassion) intuitively appears to accomplish. It would seem that spirituality could foster organisational stability and wellness in ways that require less rather than more institutional resources.

Notwithstanding the scientific and pragmatic challenges associated with a complex construct, the application of workplace spirituality holds substantial promise for an improved work experience and work environment, more so in a fragmented postmodern society with its challenges to individual and collective identities.

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