

RUNNING HEAD: THE SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF SI

The Seven Dimensions of Spiritual Intelligence:

An Ecumenical, Grounded Theory

by

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Abstract

This paper develops an ecumenical grounded theory of spiritual intelligence (SI) based on thematic analysis of 71 interviews conducted with subjects designated as spiritually intelligent by their colleague. SI is defined as the ability to apply and embody spiritual resources and qualities to enhance daily functioning and wellbeing. Participants generally identified themselves within most of the major spiritual traditions, including: Buddhism, Christianity, Hindu, Islam, Jewish, Non-Dual, Shamanic/Earth, Taoism, and Yoga. 7 major themes of SI emerged as nearly universal across the traditions and participants. They are: (a) *Consciousness*: Developed refined awareness and self-knowledge; (b) *Grace*: Living in alignment with the sacred manifesting love for and trust in life; (c) *Meaning*: Experiencing significance in daily activities through a sense of purpose and a call for service, including in the face of pain and suffering; (d) *Transcendence*: Going beyond the separate egoic self into an interconnected wholeness; (e) *Truth*: Living in open acceptance, curiosity, and love for all creation (all that is); (f) *Peaceful surrender* to Self (Truth, God, Absolute, true nature); and (g) *Inner-Directedness*: inner-freedom aligned in responsible wise action.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, theories of multiple intelligences have broadened our concept of intelligence beyond IQ to include emotional, creative, practical, social, existential and spiritual intelligences (Bar-On, 2000; Gardner, 1983, 2000; Emmons, 1999; Halama & Strizenec, 2004; Goleman, 2001; Salovey & Mayer, 1993; Sternberg, 1997a, 1997b). Whereas spirituality per se refers to the search for, and experiential elements of, the sacred, ultimate meaning, higher-consciousness, and transcendence, spiritual intelligence (SI) emphasizes the abilities that draw on such themes to predict functioning and adaptation (Emmons, 2000a). Hence, SI can be differentiated from spiritual experience (e.g. a unitary state) or spiritual belief (e.g., a belief in God.)

In this research, SI was defined as the ability to apply and embody spiritual resources and qualities to enhance daily functioning and wellbeing. Despite prior discussions of SI (Emmons, 2000b; Nasel, 2004; Vaughan, 2002; Wolman, 2001, Zohar & Marshall, 2000), there has been little or no qualitative research to develop an operational framework for SI. This qualitative study of spiritual leaders from a variety of traditions develops such a framework using grounded theory methods.

Method

Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), 71 interviews were conducted with subjects designated as spiritually intelligent by their colleagues. Subjects were recommended by their peers as examples of individuals who embody spirituality in daily life in ways that enhance their functioning and wellbeing. Using snowball sampling, interviewees were asked for additional candidates. The sample includes people who identify themselves within most of the major spiritual traditions, including the following (listed

alphabetically): Buddhism—7, Christianity—7, Earth-based (shamanic and pagan)—6, Eclectic (personal integration of several traditions)—20, Hindu—5, Islam/Sufism—5, Jewish—7, Non-Dual (spiritual self-realization involving the transcendence of subject object duality)—5, Taoism—4, and Yoga—5. The majority were spiritual teachers such as priests, rabbis, swamis, or sheikhs. Some were therapists or business leaders who integrated spirituality into their work. 36 were female and 35 were male.

Each was asked to describe their spirituality in terms of practices and qualities they cultivate in daily life; how spirituality informs their work and relationships; and how they integrate, and draw on their spirituality to help daily functioning. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to critically comment on the emergent themes from prior interviews.

Using grounded theory, open coding identified individual properties (e.g., gratitude, joy, and appreciation of beauty), and was followed by axial coding to identify themes (e.g. love of life, which combines all of the above properties). Selective coding was used to identify higher-level themes such as grace, which combines three themes: love of life; aligning with the sacred; and trust. Interviews continued until convergence and saturation of the model was achieved.

Results

The following major- and sub-themes emerged as universal across participants (the number of participants who spoke about one or more aspects of this spiritual intelligence dimension is given in parentheses):

1. *Consciousness*: Developed refined awareness and self-knowledge. (71)

- *Mindfulness* – knowing self and living consciously with clear intention and mindful, embodied awareness and presence. (69)
- *Trans-rational knowing* – transcending rationality through synthesis of paradoxes and using various states/modes of consciousness e.g. meditation, prayer, silence, intuition, dreams. (57)

- *Practice* – Using a variety of practices to develop and refine consciousness or spiritual qualities. (69)
2. *Grace*: Living in alignment with the sacred manifesting love for and trust in life. (70)
- *Sacred* - living in alignment with the divine, a universal life force, nature, or one’s true essential nature. (60)
 - *Love* – reverence and cherishing of life based on gratitude, beauty, vitality, and joy. (65)
 - *Trust* – hopeful/optimistic outlook based on faith or trust (59)
3. *Meaning*: Experiencing significance in daily activities through a sense of purpose and a call for service, including in the face of pain and suffering. (68)
4. *Transcendence*: Going beyond the separate egoic self into an interconnected wholeness. (71)
- *Relational I-Thou* – nurturing relationships and community with acceptance, respect, empathy, compassion, loving-kindness, generosity and I-Thou orientation. (70)
 - *Holism* – utilize a systems perspective seeing the wholeness, unity, and the interconnection among the diversity and differentiation. (61)
5. *Truth*: Living in open acceptance, curiosity, and love for all creation (all that is). (70)
- *Acceptance* – forgive, embrace, and love what is, including the “negative” and shadow. (66)
 - *Openness* – open heart and mind, open curiosity, including open respect for the wisdom of multiple traditions. (63)
6. *Peaceful surrender to Self* (Truth, God, Absolute, true nature). (71)
- *Peacefulness* – centered, equanimity, self-acceptance, self-compassion, and inner-wholeness, (69)
 - *Egolessness* – letting go of persona to maintain humble receptivity, surrendering, and allowing what wants and needs to happen. (63)
7. *Inner-Directedness*: Inner-freedom aligned in responsible wise action. (69)
- *Freedom* – liberation from conditioning, attachments and fears, manifesting courage, creativity, and playfulness. (65)
 - *Discernment* – wisdom to know truth using an inner-compass (conscience). (59)
 - *Integrity* – being/acting authentically, responsibly, and with alignment to one’s values. (54)

These themes appear consistent with the teachings of most spiritual traditions. They were espoused by participants from all the represented traditions, with the following exceptions: (a) a subset of some non-dual participants objected to the wording of themes that implied personal agency but agreed to the qualities presented as spontaneously arising with growing spiritual maturity or self-realization; (b) a few Buddhists objected to the qualities of hope and faith as aspects of SI because they associated them with the effort to escape from reality. Regardless, most Buddhists and participants agreed with the quality and theme of trust.

While the themes are listed linearly as if they are independent dimensions of SI, they in fact often relate, build on and lead to each other. For example, acceptance and surrender to truth was often mentioned by participants as linked to equanimity, peacefulness and inner-freedom, as in the New Testament “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John, 8:32). Similarly, deep trust was frequently related to freedom from fears, equanimity and peacefulness.

In addition to qualitative analysis of the interviews presented here, parallel work by this author and Christopher Dryer focused on the development and validation of an Integrated Spiritual Intelligence Scale (ISIS) built from these themes (Amram & Dryer, 2007). With some differences in clustering, ISIS spiritual intelligence domains and capability subscales showed significant overlap with most of the qualitative themes, sub-themes, and qualities presented earlier. The ISIS development and validation work complements and further validates the qualitative themes presented here.

Discussion

In contrast to the perennial philosophy (Huxely, 1945; Smith, 1987, 1992; Wilber, 1975, 2000), which presupposes a unifying cosmology across spiritual traditions, an ecumenical theory of SI does not necessitate such unified cosmology; at the same time, it does suggest that most

spiritual and wisdom traditions cultivate a universal set of qualities that are adaptive, i.e., increase functioning and wellbeing. For example, a Christian may align with the sacred through Jesus, while a Jew may do so through the scrolls of the Torah, and the Shaman by sitting under a tree. But the capacity to align with the sacred may be universally adaptive, i.e. spiritually intelligent.

In fact, participants in this study regularly apply their spiritual intelligence abilities to solve specific problems by tapping into particular SI capabilities such as using their intuition, transcending linear thinking through synthesis of paradoxes, or by taking a global systems perspective to solve problems more holistically. In addition to solving specific problems, participants in this study discussed how spiritual intelligence can be applied in every moment of daily life to experience greater meaning and wellbeing by practicing qualities such as mindfulness, presence, and compassion, even in the face of pain and suffering. In this regard, an ecumenical theory of spiritual intelligence holds an expanded view of human potential. In this view, people are capable of experiencing existential meaning, developing refined consciousness, living in grace, love and reverence for life, being curious and open to truth, and attaining peacefulness, wholeness, and inner-directed freedom.

In conclusion, this research has uncovered 7 dimensions for the adaptive application of spirituality in daily life that are cultivated across spiritual traditions. Having built such a grounded ecumenical theory of SI its predictive validity may be examined using a scale, such as ISIS, built from these dimensions of spiritual intelligence.

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