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I am Awake: A case for Buddhist psychology as a theoretical orientation for spiritual but not religious clients

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I am awake: A case for Buddhist psychology as a theoretical orientation for spiritual but not religious clients

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Abstract

The spiritual but not religious (SBNR) identification is a burgeoning demographic with unique spiritual concerns often unmet by Eurocentric mainstream counseling theoretical orientations. This article presents an overview of Buddhist psychology, its intersection with SBNR values, and how Buddhist psychology may be a relevant theoretical orientation for SBNR clients.

KEYWORDS

Buddhist psychology, psychotherapy, spiritual but not religious, spirituality, theoretical orientation

The personal belief figure of speech, *spiritual but not religious*, has gained significant traction in Western societies as we witness the decline of church attendance, church membership, and religious identity over the past few decades (Bruce, 2002; Chaves, 2017; Hout & Fischer, 2014; Voas, 2009; Voas & Chaves, 2016; Voas & Doebler, 2013). As of 2017, people who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR) represent 27% of America's population—a 150% increase from 2012 (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). The SBNR identity seems to be a burgeoning demographic reflective of postmodern cultural shifts characterized by distrusting religious institutions and their constructs (Mercadante, 2014). More people appear to be turning to an existential identity that can shed, to varying degrees, the religious norms, rituals, and hierarchies and, consequently, make room for more personal exploration, spiritual creativity, and deconstruction.

While the SBNR phenomenon opens up space for spiritual flexibility and exploration for people who might otherwise feel constrained and/or oppressed by religious institutions, people who are SBNR may experience anxiety around the phenomenon's purposeful ambiguity and nebulous existential/spiritual framework. Scholars and people who identify as SBNR have difficulty defining what spiritual values and frameworks support their way of moving through the world (Carey, 2018; Marshall & Olson, 2018; Saunders et al., 2020). Although an overwhelming amount of research

supports the positive correlation between religion/spirituality and positive mental health outcomes, King et al. (2013) and Saunders et al. (2020) examined the relationship between SBNR people and psychiatric symptoms and diagnoses among 7403 participants and found that "a spiritual understanding in the absence of a religious framework" (p. 71) was inversely correlated with positive mental health outcomes. They specifically cited increases in generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, neurotic disorders, substance use disorders, and use of psychotropic medications (King et al., 2013). More nuance to the authors' conclusions will be elucidated later in this paper. Although there are undoubtedly many explanations for this relationship between poor mental health and the SBNR identity, one explanation may be found in the existential uncertainty/void experienced by many SBNR people. Another explanation may be SBNR people's alienation from present and past religious, social supports. Regardless of these contributing factors, the relationship between poor mental health outcomes and the SBNR is not an indictment of a flawed spiritual identity or perspective. Rather, the relationship may be better understood by critically examining how culture and mental health supports lack the tools and perspective to adequately support the unique and valid concerns of SBNR people. Stated differently, the poor mental health outcomes are perhaps more reflective of inadequate counseling theoretical orientations and cultural understanding surrounding SBNR people, not a flaw in the SBNR identity itself.

Unfortunately, many counseling theoretical orientations practiced in America may not adequately address the vital spiritual concerns integral to the holistic focus counselors supposedly offer through counseling. Modern counseling in the West is often centered around humanist and/or postmodern assumptions rather than spiritual or religious principles (Slife, 2012). While there are several theories that investigate and explore client values and meaning, these modalities lack the explicit spiritual meaning, rituals, and framework to assist SNBR clients and adequately conceptualize their spiritual struggles (Mercadante, 2020). Although counselors may consider Christian counseling as a sufficient form of psychotherapy to address spiritual concerns, the main models of Christian counseling are too prescriptive and value imposing to be effective with a cohort whose intention is to experience more spiritual flexibility outside the contexts of dominant religious discourse (Mercadante, 2020; Park, 2015). For these reasons, it appears there is a gap between the spiritual needs of SBNR clients and the perspectives offered by widely known theoretical orientations taught across most clinical counseling programs in the West. With that gap in mind, this presentation will offer a case for Buddhist psychology as a culturally relevant theoretical orientation that may help SBNR clients structure spiritual meaning around their life while still honoring the spiritual flexibility they desire.

While Buddhist psychology is undoubtedly informed by Buddhism, which does have a certain amount of religious rigidity, Buddhist psychology is different from the religion itself and better understood as a spiritual/psychological philosophy. Unlike religions, Buddhist psychology does not proselytize or prescribe specific religious behaviors or beliefs. Instead, scholars and clinicians of Buddhist psychology focus on how Buddhist philosophy and spirituality inform how we can relate to suffering from a place of compassion, contemplation, nonattachment, selflessness, and acceptance—providing a more open, culturally appropriate spiritual structure for people outside Buddhism (Epstein, 2014; Fulton, 2014; Kato, 2016; Mick, 2017).

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Defining terms and constructs

Before discussing the demographics and spiritual concerns of SBNR people, it may be helpful to define what it means to be SBNR. Although scholars have not arrived at a concrete definition for SBNR (Carey, 2018; Marshall & Olson, 2018; Saunders et al., 2020), they have used qualitative research, philosophical understandings, factor analysis, and survey research to highlight some of the themes within religion, spirituality, and how they differ and intersect (Carey, 2018; Marshall & Olson, 2018;

McClintock et al., 2016; Mercadante, 2020). These differences and intersections between religion and spirituality will be presented to help understand the meaning behind the term SBNR.

Religion

The SBNR label appears to obscure any concrete definitions, making operationalizing this concept or defining any specific beliefs quite challenging (Carey, 2018; Marshall & Olson, 2018; Saunders et al., 2020). It may be helpful to break down the concept by deconstructing two of its components—spiritual and religious. The construct, religious, seems to be the more defined and perhaps familiar of the two. Carey (2018) describes religion as "A system of, usually communal, rites of veneration and devotion to a particular person or object" (p. 267). Woods and Ironson (1999) found that people who primarily identified as religious connected their faith with institutions and rituals of faith, while people who primarily connected with spirituality valued individual transcendence. In this way, religion connects to a structure of communal practices, doctrine, and dogma, and institutionalization (Carey, 2018).

Spirituality

Defining spiritual or spirituality appears to be a little more complicated. As mentioned previously, Woods and Ironson (1999) found that spiritual people primarily connected to *individual* transcendence. McClintock et al. (2016) conducted a factor analysis and found five different factors to define spirituality: love, unifying interconnectedness, altruism, contemplative practice, and spiritual reflection. Carey (2018) describes spirituality as an ethically directed way of life that focuses on inner transformation. Carey (2018) postulates that the difference between regular ethics and spirituality is the *inward turn* (p. 264). Carey (2018) describes the inward turn as a recognition of how our patterns of thought and responses are central to our ability to "lead flourishing, ethical lives" and sustained attention to our interior world in order to foster healthy wellbeing. In this way, spirituality is seen as contemplative and concerned about individual motivations and actions. Spirituality might be best understood as the heart or purpose behind religion. For example, when looking at the Christian tradition of the Eucharist, religion might be understood in this context as the communal process and liturgy of consuming bread and wine, while spirituality focuses on the repentance, forgiveness, and sacrifice the Eucharist symbolizes. Together, these two foci create a spiritual *and* religious experience around the Eucharist. Stated differently, religion may be the institutionalized process and beliefs that, ideally, are designed to usher in the meaning and transcendence spirituality seeks to ascertain.

Spirituality and religion: overlapping and independent constructs

Although it seems religion and spirituality are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the SBNR concept necessitates that spirituality and religion can stand alone as separate entities. In order to understand how someone can be SBNR, it may be helpful to look at the reverse by understanding how someone can identify as religious but not spiritual. Carey (2018) exemplifies the phenomenon of religious but not spiritual by describing those who attend a place of worship, participate in sacraments and other rituals, and are part of the community within their religious group, but their internal motivations and intentions are not all that different from those who do not share their religious viewpoint. In this way, religious but not spiritual people fulfill the social norms and performative actions of their religious group but are not changed inwardly as a result. James Fowler (1981) who pioneered the first widely accepted faith development theory, *Stages of Faith*, might place this type of person in stage three (synthetic-conventional faith) of his model, which characterizes this stage as adhering to authority of the institution, conforming to community norms, and not questioning or taking responsibility for one's own beliefs and practices. Stage three is one of six faith stages along a

continuum, which progressively reflects more abstract, complex, and compassionate faith understanding and practice.

In contrast, the term SBNR assumes that spirituality can exist apart from religion by pursuing individual transcendence and transformation without institutionalized norms, rituals, and communal beliefs (Carey, 2018). Marshall and Olson (2018) studied how SBNR people defined their beliefs in relation to spiritual and religious, religious and not spiritual, and not spiritual or religious groups and found four key beliefs to be statistically different and had the strongest agreement for SBNR people: (a) you do not have to attend church to be truly religious, (b) you can easily be truly religious without attending church, (c) the divine exists within each person, not *somewhere out there*, and (d) personal spirituality is more important than belonging to a religion. Marshall and Olson (2018) describe these SBNR beliefs as *anti-institutional spirituality*. For SBNR people, these beliefs suggest that true religion can be equated to spirituality and does not require institutional participation. This idea connects with Carey's (2018) thoughts about how spirituality is the purpose or heart behind religion.

Carey (2018) continues to discuss how the SBNR term in the West seems to pursue an individualistic pursuit of inner transcendence and contemplation. He argues that spirituality contains doctrine, ethics, and a metaphysical essence that overlap with religion, but spirituality does not have to hold the cultish parts of religion. Carey (2018) does not use the word cult pejoratively but describes it as a set of religious communal practices and institutional systems.

Demographics and phenomenon

According to a survey of 5002 American adults, people who identify as SBNR represent 27% of the total population—a percentage that has grown substantially by 150% since 2012 (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). Other survey data and research suggest SBNR people represent 20–37% of the total population (Fuller, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2012). These survey data also categorize the SBNR identifier by age, religious affiliation, and education (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). According to cited data, SBNR people tend to be a slightly younger cohort with ages 18–22, 30–49, 50–64, and 65 and older representing 22, 36, 30, and 12% respectively. Longitudinal data indicate the SBNR demographic is growing at a statistically significant rate among the three younger age cohorts (18–22, 30–49, 50–64). Compared with the American public, the SBNR group has obtained more education as a majority of SBNR people have obtained some college (37%) or college graduate status (34%), while the rest of the sample reported an average of some college and college graduate status at 28 and 25%, respectively. Finally, the religious affiliation of SBNR people is 35% Protestant, 14% Catholic, 37% unaffiliated, 11% other, and 3% unsure or refused to answer.

Given Lipka and Gecewicz's (2017) survey data, there are notable observations regarding the age, educational, and religious representation of the SBNR demographic. In regard to age, the SBNR demographic is rapidly growing as a whole and among younger adults. Taking into account the SBNR constructs stated earlier and the previously cited research concerning the decline in church attendance and religious identity, this growth among younger adults suggests the culture may be shifting toward an independent and introspective sense of spirituality and away from communal rituals and institutionalized religion. Additionally, the high levels of education among SBNR people compared with the American public suggests higher education may have an influence on how religious identity is encouraged, or in this case—not encouraged. Alternatively, perhaps SBNR people gravitate to higher education because it gives them greater opportunities to explore spiritual ideas outside dominant religious discourse. Finally, the fact that 60% of the SBNR respondents identified with a religious affiliation (Protestant, Catholic, and other) means religious affiliation and the SBNR identifier are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although the term SBNR by definition suggests a separation between religion and spirituality, this is not necessarily the case for all people identifying as SBNR. SBNR people may participate in, identify with, and/or believe in parts of religious institutions, rituals, doctrine, and community. The difference here is their emphasis on the transformative, intrapersonal experience

of the religious system and process it hopes to engender rather than the religious system and process itself (Carey, 2018; Marshall & Olson, 2018; Woods & Ironson, 1999).

Spiritual concerns, understandings, and needs

Because the SBNR identity is particularly oriented around personal transcendence and existential concerns without necessarily having the structure of religion to facilitate answers or spiritual development, SBNR people present unique needs in discovering self, understanding self in relation to others, and moving toward spiritual development (Mercadante, 2020). Through qualitative research on SBNR people, Mercadante (2020) found many of the unique spiritual struggles of SBNR people can lead to depression, addiction, and workaholism. Furthermore, Mercadante (2020) found many SBNR people are in recovery groups because of the way these groups foster a sense of purpose and spiritual orientation. For example, programs like Alcoholics Anonymous focus on a higher power, authenticity, and community—all of which can be difficult to find for SBNR people because spiritual communities within religious institutions can feel alienating, incredulous, rigid, and patronizing to the SBNR (Mercadante, 2020; Sedlar et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2012).

As mentioned earlier, King et al. (2013) suggested SBNR people are more vulnerable to mental health diagnoses due to a lack of religious framework. Without contextualization, this suggestion may pathologize the SBNR identity and further cause harm/stigmatization to the SBNR people by implying the SBNR perspective is flawed, thus shifting the responsibility to *fixing* the SBNR identity. Additionally, this implication adds to some preexisting oppressive stereotypes that suggest SBNR people are lazy, shallow, and self-focused (Mercadante, 2020). However, counselors are ethically positioned to work within the client's value system, and their training opposes *fixing* clients. In theory, this should not be a common pitfall for competent counselors. To expand on the King et al. (2013) conclusions about the relationship between mental health diagnoses and SBNR people, I am proposing that religious alienation, society's intolerance for ambiguity, and inadequate psychotherapeutic supports are at least partially responsible for the correlation between mental health outcomes and SBNR people.

Self and identity

One of the most common spiritual struggles Mercadante (2020) identified in SBNR participants was their understanding of self and identity. Many SBNR people describe a *divine spark* from within and find spirituality by living authentically (Mercadante, 2014, 2020). SBNR people with previous religious affiliation experienced tension between their focus on finding themselves from within rather than turning to an external or divine source as they may have once done prior to becoming SBNR (Mercadante, 2020). Additionally, because many SBNR people do not place trust in religious institutions to give them answers about identity and finding one's self (i.e., being a child of God), the burden of self-actualization is on the SBNR individual, which can be anxiety-provoking and isolating given their own individual transformation is not clearly answered through any one process (Albanese, 2007; Fuller, 2001; Hanegraaff, 1998; Heelas, 1996; Heelas et al., 2005; Mercadante, 2014; Schmidt, 2005). Furthermore, SBNR people may encounter a tortuous circle of searching as the self is both agent and object of transformation. This may require a new identification or conceptualization of self in order to avoid this metaphorical tail chase of self-transformation and transcendence. This research suggests that the SBNR's quest for understanding self and transcendence requires less prescriptive answers (which are often provided in religious institutions) and more of a process or foundation for *how* to be authentic and experience transcendence. Of course, this need for a process must also balance the SBNR's need for flexibility and autonomy, or it risks becoming another institutionalized ritual for SBNRs to reject.

Self-in-relation

Self-in-relation was another common spiritual struggle Mercadante (2020) identified in the SBNR. The self-in-relation struggle concerns how the self is connected to others and the universe, and it also considers if and how these interconnections are ordered/impacted by each other (Mercadante, 2020). In relation to transcendence or a divine nature, Mercadante (2020) found that many SBNR had difficulty giving up the idea of God, or, if they did believe in God, the SBNR understood God to be less of a being, especially a being with an implied gender (i.e., using masculine pronouns, patriarchal imagery and characteristics), and understood God to be more of a divine force or energy that is present in all things. This understanding of transcendence and divine qualities being in all things develops a sense of interconnectedness with humanity, nature, and a feeling of innate goodness (Mercadante, 2020). For this reason, SBNR people tend to experience transcendence horizontally rather than vertically because spirituality is located among people and nature rather than in some external, higher being (Mercadante, 2014). Furthermore, the SBNR's abstraction of God as more of a force and less of an anthropomorphic being fits the characteristics of higher faith stages in Fowler's (1981) faith development theory.

Many SBNR people experience isolation and marginalization in a country where Christianity is the dominant facilitator for understanding spiritual truths (Sedlar et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2012). Additionally, many SBNR people understand themselves in relation to justice and order through karma, a Buddhist and Hindu belief that explains the cause-and-effect relationship between ourselves and the environment (Mercadante, 2020). In all of the self-in-relation concerns, it seems the greatest hurdle for the SBNR is how to develop spiritually without proper counseling theories while existing in a society that largely cultivates spiritual truth through religion. Mercadante (2020) notes that there is no clear roadmap for the SBNR people to understand their spiritual development process, and the current purely psychological tools (i.e., traditional theoretical orientations and coping skills) are incomplete in their ability to address their spiritual concerns.

Theoretical orientation gaps and alignment with the SBNR

Research findings indicate spiritual and/or religious (R/S) concerns are best addressed by R/S-infused counseling. In a meta-analysis, Captari et al. (2018) wanted to understand the efficacy of R/S psychotherapies on R/S clients compared with secular psychotherapies. The authors gathered 97 studies (most of which were clinical trials) with a total of 7181 R/S participants. In their most important analysis, Captari et al. (2018) compared the efficacy of spiritual outcomes and psychological outcomes for R/S clients when they received R/S adaptive psychotherapies verse psychotherapies with the same theoretical orientation but with no R/S component (i.e., Buddhism-infused CBT verse traditional CBT). Although there was no significant difference in psychological outcomes between the two forms of therapy on R/S clients, there was a significant difference in spiritual outcomes favoring the R/S adaptive treatment. In other words, the meta-analysis provides further evidence supporting the idea that R/S concerns are best assuaged by R/S psychotherapies.

Given the constructs, demographics, and spiritual needs of the SBNR, finding a culturally appropriate theoretical orientation for the SBNR presents many challenges. Behavioral theoretical orientations such as cognitive behavioral therapy (Dobson & Dozois, 2019), rational emotive behavioral therapy (Ellis & Joffe-Ellis, 2019), and dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan, 2000) appear inadequate to address the existential questions SBNR people face. While more humanistic focused theoretical orientations like logotherapy/existential psychotherapy (Frankl, 1963), developmental counseling and therapy (Ivey et al., 2005), and narrative therapy (Payne, 2006) may come closer in exploring existential concerns for the SBNR, these theoretical orientations are perhaps incomplete in helping SBNR understand *how* to develop spiritually. These meaning/existential focused theoretical orientations

may abstract or obscure spiritual development by relying almost exclusively on meaning/existential exploration and lack explicit spiritual/transcendent frameworks to support spiritual growth.

Given the SBNR values and themes stated earlier, a culturally appropriate theoretical orientation should focus on transformative intrapersonal work, a sense of horizontal transcendence, a sense of interconnectedness with everything, spiritual contemplation, and altruism. Most importantly, a SBNR-aligned theoretical orientation cannot be too prescriptive and must allow SBNR people to develop spirituality without unnecessary borders because the theoretical orientation may run the risk of becoming too institutionalized/prescriptive and thus rejected. Finally, given the demographics of SBNR people, the orientation should show some evidence of working well with the demographic representation of the SBNR.

Because of the abstractness surrounding spirituality and theoretical orientations, a metaphor may be useful to help solidify how a theoretical orientation may best fit the spiritual and psychological needs of the SBNR. If spiritual development can be seen as a journey, then religion, from the perspective of the SBNR, is the instruction guide mapping out each turn with little or no room for exploration and flexibility. The existential or meaning focused theoretical orientations can be seen as roadmaps that may help the SBNR explore different directions and existential inquiries, but there is still a spiritual dimension that is incomplete. The topographical landscape of spirituality and spiritual enlightenment is not present in these roadmaps. A culturally appropriate theoretical orientation for the SBNR adds this topographical or spiritual landscape to the map—giving SBNR people the terrain and tools to pursue spiritual development without being completely adrift or constrained.

Upon examining the relevant literature, there do not seem to be any empirical studies linking specific spiritual theoretical orientations to SBNR clients. However, in a pilot service assessment study, Scalora et al. (2020) tested a spiritual mind-body (SMB) program on 141 graduate students in order to measure the program's effectiveness across several different wellness domains. The 8-week SMB program was designed to attenuate depressive, anxious, and posttraumatic stress symptoms and increase psychological flexibility, personal spirituality, and mindfulness. Scalora et al. (2020) measured changes in six of these domains across pre/posttests using psychometric assessments germane to each domain. Furthermore, the SMB program integrated many Buddhist informed or Buddhist converging workshops (i.e., mindfulness skills, yoga, discovering no-self, and contemplative practices). On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high, the majority of the participants indicated they value spirituality either moderately (27.8%), highly (12.8%), or very highly (36.8%), and by contrast, they largely ranked their value of religion as very low (42.4) or low (22%). Although a majority of the participants value spirituality more than religion, this does not mean the majority of the participants identify as SBNR. However, there may be at least some commonalities between the ethos of SBNR people and that of this participant pool, especially their connection between prioritizing spirituality over religion. After completing the program, the results indicated significant changes across all domains except anxious symptoms, but this was somewhat expected by the researchers as they noted the literature's weak to inconclusive evidence supporting the efficacy for R/S-based interventions for anxiety (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013; Delaney et al., 2011; Koenig, 2009). In summary, the sample, comprised of people valuing spirituality over religion, benefitted spiritually and psychologically from workshops borrowing either directly or indirectly from Buddhist psychology. This evidence alone is not enough to support the connection between Buddhist psychology and SBNR clients, but there is a theoretical connection worth exploring, which further buttresses Buddhist psychology's relevance to SBNR clients.

BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY

Buddhist psychology and Buddhism

Although Buddhism is a religion and not entirely a counseling theoretical orientation, in many ways, the Buddha's teachings are some of the earliest and most psychological in nature in comparison with

other religions (Smith, 1991). While Buddhism is not exceptional to other religions, it is perhaps somewhat unique to other religions in some respects. For example, Buddhism does not rely on a deity to explain truth as there is no creator God the Buddhists worship or follow, and it has no single set of sacred texts they adhere to (Coleman, 2001). Because Buddhist psychology borrows from Buddhist principles, the fact that Buddhists do not worship a deity, Buddha himself, or ascribe to a specific set of religious texts, may put Buddhist psychology at an advantage for people interested in spirituality without feeling too constrained by theological viewpoints.

The name Buddhist psychology may be slightly misleading as it could imply that it is either a form of counseling for Buddhists or its aim is to completely align itself to Buddhist doctrine held by a particular Buddhist sect. On the contrary, Buddhist psychology scholars are not exercising any religious exclusivity in their application, encouraging the reading of Buddhist texts, joining a sangha (a Buddhist community), or adhering to any specific Buddhist codes (Epstein, 2014; Fulton, 2014; Kato, 2016; Mick, 2017). Perhaps a more accurate term would be Buddhist *informed* psychology as Buddhist psychology makes no effort to convert people to Buddhism or to be useful to only Buddhists. Instead, Buddhist psychology explores the intersection of the Buddha's teachings about *no-self* and *the four noble truths* as they relate to emotional pain, wellbeing, and ego liberation (Epstein, 2014; Fulton, 2014; Kato, 2016; Mick, 2017). This distinction between Buddhist psychology and Buddhism is important because SBNR people are looking for ways to address their spiritual concerns without exclusive religious conditions. Additionally, Buddhist psychology shares some alignment with humanist psychology because of how self-actualization from the Buddhist perspective is discovered through experience and from within. After all, the Buddha reportedly said: "be a light unto yourself, do not take my word for it, go see for yourself" (Michalon, 2001). In this way, Buddhist psychology is intensely introspective, experiential, and reflects the *inward turn* of spirituality (Carey, 2018). Finally, while Buddhist psychology may not be mainstream in the West, it is a mistake to think of Buddhist psychology as a fringe or an alternative theoretical orientation. Many Western mainstream counseling theoretical orientations like acceptance and commitment therapy (Luoma et al., 2017), dialectical and behavioral therapy (Linehan, 2000), and mindfulness-based stress reduction (Goldstein & Stahl, 2015) all borrow directly from Buddhist thought in how they teach relating to emotions through self-compassion and mindfulness. Furthermore, Buddhist psychology and its mindfulness-based psychotherapies have been empirically shown to help abstain from addictive behaviors, reduce anger, ameliorate anxiety, assuage depression, and increase compassion and connectedness to others (Avants & Margolin, 2004; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Kristeller & Johnson, 2005; Teasdale et al., 2000; Vannoy & Hoyt, 2004). Unfortunately, there seem to be no empirical studies linking Buddhist psychology's effectiveness to SBNR clients, which further highlights the significance of this discussion. However, by connecting Buddhist psychology's assumptions to the values and needs of SBNR clients, a theoretical/thematic connection may justify Buddhist psychology as a culturally appropriate theoretical orientation for SBNR clients. Therefore, a description of Buddhist psychology is warranted for the purpose of drawing the connection to SBNR concerns and values.

The four noble truths: a different way to relate to suffering

The Buddha once said, "I teach only suffering and the end of suffering" (Bodhi, 1995). This phrase captures what the Buddha's four noble truths are all about: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cure to suffering, and the cessation of suffering. In many ways, the four noble truths, which are core Buddhist beliefs, lay the foundation for all acceptance-based psychotherapies, including Buddhist psychology (Epstein, 2014).

First noble truth: life is pervasively unsatisfactory

After the Buddha's enlightenment, his claimed life is full of *dukkha* in his first noble truth (Epstein, 1995). The Buddha's word *dukkha* is traditionally translated to suffering, but *pervasively unsatisfactory* may be a more useful translation (Epstein, 1995). For the sake of following the common translation of suffering in other Buddhist psychology literature, I will use suffering and unsatisfactory interchangeably. The existential idea of the first noble truth is that to be human is to experience dissatisfaction (Fulton, 2014). This is a holistic truth as dissatisfaction can come through relationships, job titles, wealth, physical and mental health, and ultimately death (Epstein, 1995). From the Buddhist perspective, no matter how hard we may reach for status, relationships, health, and wealth to experience satisfactoriness, we are always are left wanting (Epstein, 1995). Buddhist psychology uses the first noble truth to highlight life's fragility in that most of the things we cling to are temporary, prone to entropy, imperfect, and not completely within our control (Aich, 2013).

Unlike the medical model where pain implies the presence of pathology, the first noble truth normalizes the existence of pain as something inevitable to the human condition (Fulton, 2014). In this way, the experience of painful emotions is not moralized into bad or negative emotions or even feelings we need to shed in order to be well. Instead, painful emotions are an important part of the human condition, and they may have something to offer. For example, if a pebble in one's shoe is causing pain, the pain itself not the problem, but rather, it is indication that something needs to be addressed—in this case, removing the pebble. Buddhist psychology is not concerned with eliminating anxious or depressive feelings but is focused more on developing a different relationship with those emotions. Stated differently, the focus of Buddhist psychology is not what we experience, but how we relate to that experience (Epstein, 2014).

Second noble truth: attachment causes suffering

The Buddha's second noble truth is that attachment is the cause of suffering (Epstein, 1995). According to Epstein (1995), attachment is a clinging to that which cannot be controlled, preserved, or satisfied. In this way, attachment is a delusion that does not honor the impermanence, imperfections, and uncertainty of life. Instead, attachments seek permanent satisfaction in relationships, wealth, health, and the protection of the ego. Of course, all these things do not bring ultimate satisfaction, but we exacerbate our emotional pain by believing and clinging to the delusion that we can obtain life-long satisfaction through impermanent objects.

The second noble truth also highlights an important distinction between pain and suffering (Fulton, 2014). From the Buddhist perspective, pain is inescapable in that we may experience poor health, divorce, feeling unloved by our parents, loss, and death (Fulton, 2014). The psychological wounding or trauma associated with these life events is ubiquitous to everyone and cannot be jettisoned. Suffering, however, compounds our trauma and is caused by this clinging or attachment underscored in the second noble truth.

The connection between suffering and attachment can be described in a few ways. For example, the desire to distance ourselves from or extinguish unwanted emotions/content is a form of attachment that may lead to greater suffering. In this case, the *attachment* is a clinging to the belief or expectation that we can separate ourselves from or eradicate painful emotions. From the psychoanalytic perspective, this type of emotional estrangement is conveyed in Freud's defense mechanisms, many of which explain how our suppressed emotions/thoughts often manifest in unexpected/unhelpful ways (Epstein, 1995). Another example of attachment and suffering is in how we may cling to impermanent objects to satiate our happiness. Freud's *pleasure principle* communicates this idea as well (Epstein, 1995). Both the pleasure principle and the second noble truth acknowledge that temporary happiness can certainly come from seeking pleasure from impermanent objects, but when we believe they can

ultimately assuage our discomfort with finality, we self-inflict further distress when we are inevitably faced with dissatisfaction. In conclusion, the delineation between psychological pain and suffering may be best summarized as this: pain is our immediate, unpleasant emotional experience, and suffering is a relationship to unpleasant emotions through addiction, estrangement, and craving—all of which are forms of attachment.

Third and fourth noble truth: the middle way—a cure for suffering

Because the third noble truth promises a cure to suffering and the fourth noble truth explains the cure (Epstein, 1995), I am condensing these two separate truths in this space for the sake of brevity. Starting with the third noble truth, the Buddha brought a relentless optimism to what otherwise might be a pessimistic ontology had he ended with the second noble truth. Following the philosophical trajectory of the first two noble truths, the cure to suffering is the ability to create a relational home to painful emotions (Epstein, 2014). The relational home is cultivated by what Buddha called *the middle way* or *the eightfold path* (Epstein, 2019). The middle way is a discipline in exercising nonattachment though nonstriving and a process toward spiritual enlightenment (Epstein, 2019). In this way, emotions, thoughts, and desires are not pushed aside puritanically; nor are they relentlessly pursued and absorbed. Instead, the middle way offers a nonjudgmental way to relate to painful emotions through mindfulness. By staying in the present moment through mindfulness, the middle way strikes a balance point between the past and future, self-denial and gluttony, and existence and nonexistence (Epstein, 1995).

While there are seven other pillars in addition to mindfulness that create the eightfold path and are essential to Buddhist psychology, mindfulness has by far been the one most highlighted in mainstream therapies and Buddhist psychology (Epstein, 2019) and perhaps most relevant to this paper. A German Buddhist llama, Nyanaponkika Thera (1962), described mindfulness as *bare attention*: "Bare Attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception" (p. 30). Using bare attention, Nyanaponkika Thera teaches us to pay attention to the present moment and separate our immediate experience from our internal commentary or evaluation of that experience. This also explains, again, the delineation between psychological pain (i.e., unpleasant emotion) and suffering (i.e., judgmental commentary on those emotions). Buddhist psychology offers the spiritual exercise of meditation as a method of facilitating a mindfulness practice (Epstein, 2019). By concentrating on the breath and bringing our focus on our immediate senses, we can learn to transcend the ego's commentary and its attachment to certainty, separation, impermanence, and perfection.

No-self

Perhaps the most unique and spiritual concept of Buddhist psychology is the Buddhist concept, *no-self*. Contrary to what no-self seems to suggest by name only, no-self is a powerful tool for spiritual transcendence and feeling whole in our postmodern era (Coleman, 2001). No-self is a complex doctrine, but the core idea behind it is that there is no unchanging, separate, individual self (Mick, 2017). Instead, the Buddha often talked about how there is no-self apart from our environment, no-self apart from relationships, and no-self apart from this world (Epstein, 2014). In this way, our inner experience is connected with our environment and others through our joys, trauma, failures, and victories. This interconnection is also related to *karma*, the Buddhist idea that we have a cause-and-effect relationship with our environment and others (Mercadante, 2020). When the Buddha talked about the balance of existence and nonexistence, he was referencing the doctrine of no-self (Epstein, 1995), as the self does not exist as its own independent entity, but yet, it is still a part of us and our environment.

Although in the West, we may read the doctrine of no-self and agree with it in theory, many of our actions and cultural messages seem to indicate otherwise. Much of our identities are seemingly solidified in job titles, relationships, personality traits, wealth, and hobbies, and we work hard to cultivate a sense of individuality, distinctness, and pseudo-self-awareness (Epstein, 2014). Epstein recounts a moment his colleague, Robert Thurman, experienced while learning about no-self with his Mongolian Buddhist lama to describe this sense of separateness further. Thurman's lama said to him, "It's not that you're not real. We all think we're really real, and that's not wrong. You are real. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerate it" (p. 95). This exaggeration of our sense of self as having its own unique essence is what the Buddha interrogates (Epstein, 2014). Furthermore, Buddhist psychology uses no-self to argue that our attachment to the self as a solid and separate essence contributes to our suffering by keeping us psychologically inflexible and disconnected from others (Fulton, 2014).

Rather than exaggerating a distinctive, separate, and unchanging identity, no-self offers a way for us to honor the ways we are integrated with our environment and capable of experiencing life differently. Instead of replaying the self-prescribed actions and internal experiences in response to stimuli, no-self challenges us to explore a dynamic range of responses beyond our ego's conditioning. This allows us to exercise psychological flexibility by pushing us past our self-imposed behavioral limits and emotional interpretations. Another benefit to no-self is that it connects us with others. Rather than focusing on self-esteem, a concept that is predicated on how people compare with each other and plagues many Westerners with self-doubt and self-estrangement, no-self underscores the Buddhist value of common humanity and reinforces an assumed positive sense of self (Epstein, 1995).

Buddhism in a postmodern era

In a survey of 351 Western Buddhists, the majority of participants indicated they became involved in Buddhism in order to fulfill some kind of spiritual need (Coleman, 2001). Coleman (2001) attributes this need to spiritual concerns over self and identity, which are exacerbated by postmodernism. While postmodernism is a complex philosophy reaching far beyond spirituality and identity, it certainly impacts how society conceptualizes identity development (Coleman, 2001). According to Coleman (2001), under the tide of postmodernism, a "tightly knit community in which everyone had their place has been replaced with the anonymous institutions of mass society. In the place of the old social consensus, there now stands a cacophony of competing viewpoints" (p. 211). Coleman (2001) continues to describe how identity was somewhat of a given based on one's place within society, but the wake of postmodernism has led to an exponential number of divergent groups and a refraction of infinite viewpoints. As a result, identity is no longer assumed, and people have to actively work to create their identity and revise it according to societal expectations and self-appraisal. The recursive process of self-identity generation is perhaps one of the most exhausting existential crises in our postmodern era. My intention is not to support or critique postmodernism but to discuss how postmodernism impacts our psychological development.

Again, the concept of no-self may be the antidote to fulfilling some of the spiritual needs of our postmodern age and the *self and identity* as well as the *self-in-relation* spiritual concerns of SBNR people. No-self charts a new orientation to anchor these concerns over identity by allowing people to exercise horizontal transcendence, assumed self-worth, and nonattachment to ego defenses. Additionally, Buddhist psychology's focus on the acceptance of uncertainty may be helpful not only to tolerate the uncertainty attached to spiritual truth and exploration, but it is also useful in a postmodern age where metanarratives and normative claims are met with incredulousness. In short, Buddhist psychology offers equanimity within the chaos.

DISCUSSION

In the early 1990s, William James, a psychologist at Harvard, suddenly stopped lecturing when he recognized a Buddhist monk in his audience and said, "Take my chair. . . You are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I. This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now" (Epstein, 1995). Although James' revelation has not necessarily evolved the way he might have imagined, Buddhist psychology, whether by its direct application or in how it informs other acceptance-based therapies, has certainly yielded helpful practice and erudition among academics and counselors, as it provides both a spiritual and psychological orientation for counseling.

Counselors may find Buddhist psychology a culturally appropriate theoretical orientation to address the values and spiritual concerns of SBNR people. Through the idea of no-self, Buddhist psychology helps SBNR people traverse the unknown by providing a map to explore their spiritual questions of *self-in-relation* and *self and identity* in a postmodern age. In this way, no-self is the spiritual essence of Buddhist psychology and provides both an orientation and connection back to one's self and our relationship with one's environment. Additionally, the SBNR's values of *horizontal transcendence* and the *inward turn* overlap well with the focus of Buddhist psychology's emphasis on common humanity, contemplative reflection, and transcendence of one's ego by mindfully experiencing one's interconnection with others. Furthermore, Buddhist psychology separates itself from the Buddhist religion and gives SBNR people the flexibility to explore their own spiritual development. In other words, Buddhist psychology is unconcerned with whether or not a client's spiritual development leads to participation in Buddhist religious elements (i.e., following monastic codes or joining a sangha). This openness to explore can be a liberating experience for people accustomed to the prescriptive and dualistic frameworks associated with religion and religious counseling orientations. In many ways, this liberation and freedom to explore outside the confines of a purely religious structure honors the humanistic focus of counseling while adding a spiritual dimension often overlooked by most of its theories. Rather than providing definitive answers to all spiritual questions, Buddhist psychology invites us to relate to our experiences differently, transcend identity, tolerate uncertainty, and adopt a posture of curiosity toward ourselves and others. These foci aid spiritual development through experiential learning rather than a purely cognitive process. Therefore, it would behoove counselors to learn and use Buddhist psychology as a viable theoretical orientation to address the spiritual needs of the seemingly humanistic, SBNR phenomenon.

Limitations

Although there are many aligned values between SBNR people and Buddhist psychology, there are a few gaps and limitations to this connection. The first limitation is Buddhist psychology's absence of God. Although many SBNR people reject the idea of God, especially God as an embodied being, many SBNR people have not completely abandoned their trust in God. While Buddhist psychology presents no qualms or conflicts with the idea of God, any discussion about God is absent from Buddhist psychology, as Buddhism does not have a creator God to venerate. Of course, a competent multicultural counselor, regardless of their theoretical orientation, should ideally have the skills to integrate conversations about God if God is important to the client, but Buddhist psychology does not offer any guidance to understanding a divine being as God. Another limitation is the lack of research connecting SBNR clients to Buddhist psychology. I have identified common themes between these two constructs and made a case for their connection, but until more researchers investigate the effectiveness of Buddhist psychology on SBNR people, this justification remains theoretical.

Recommendation for research

More research is needed to understand Buddhist psychology's relevance and effectiveness in addressing the spiritual concerns of SBNR clients. Qualitative and quantitative methods would be helpful in both understanding and measuring Buddhist psychology's effect on SBNR clients. Furthermore, more research is needed on theoretical orientations that contain deep spiritual elements like Buddhist psychology. I do not presume Buddhist psychology is the only theoretical orientation that is inherently spiritual without being religiously prescriptive, but the readily available literature on SBNR psychotherapies is scant. Therefore, in order to increase our awareness of spiritual theoretical orientations, scholars may have to reach beyond or extend the current scope of behavioral and humanistic counseling modalities.

CONCLUSIONS

In Steinbeck's (1951) novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, Jim Casey, an ex-preacher who is disillusioned with his former religious identity, portrays a Christ-archetypal character who embodies what it means to be SBNR. The following passage highlights Casey's highly spiritual vision:

> A fellow ain't got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, then… I'll be around in the dark - I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight, so hungry people can't eat, I'll be there. (p. 419)

Casey's vision, the vision of Buddhist psychology, and the vision of the SBNR are about *waking up* to the reality that we belong to each other as spiritually interconnected beings. A part of us is connected, impacted, and responsible *to* our neighbor's pain and joy. When the Buddha was questioned about his state of being postenlightenment, he replied, "I am awake," which is what the name *Buddha* means—the awakened one (Kornfield, 1998). Like the Buddha's revelation of our interconnectedness, Jesus, Saint Theresa, and other spiritually enlightened people are always underscoring how we are all responsible to each other. This kind of awakening to our common humanity is the vision of all counseling and spiritual healing and is worth incorporating into our scholarship and practice.

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