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Leadership and Spirituality: Conceptualization, Definition and Future Directions in Higher Education

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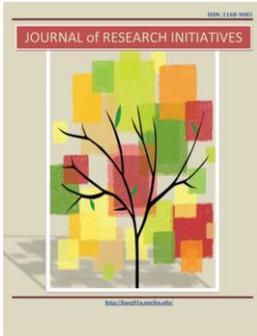
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Keywords

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LEADERSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY: CONCEPTUALIZATION, DEFINITION, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This conceptual paper addresses the increased need to better conceptualize and define Spirituality and Leadership in higher education. Over the past decade, empirical research related to Spirituality and Leadership have gained momentum and has attracted interest from scholars worldwide. With the increasing diversity of cultures and beliefs, particularly in western societies, the academia's acknowledgments of Spirituality and Leadership's importance not only present potentialities, but also to reveal challenges. Therefore, this systematic literature review attempts to reconcile diverse viewpoints into a more cohesive conceptualization and definition in the higher education context.

Keywords: leadership, spirituality, emerging, theory, practice

Introduction

The interest in Spirituality and Leadership has grown exponentially in the past decade attracting the attention of organizations and researchers (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Fernando, 2011; Fry & Cohen, 2009; Fry, Latham, Clinebell, & Krahnke, 2017; Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009; Phipps, 2012; Pawar, 2013; Yang & Fry, 2018). The conceptual origins of Spirituality and Leadership are diverse. While some researchers believe it originated and developed within a "Judeo-Christian" perspective (Fernando, 2011, p. 489), others, such as Chawla and Guda (2010) suggested it was within an "Indian ethos" (p. 158). Despite the discussion of its roots, researchers agree that interdisciplinary fields have influenced the concept of Spirituality and Leadership, which have been expanding over the past few years (Fernando, 2007; Usman, & Danish, 2010).

Academia's acknowledgment the importance of Spirituality and Leadership not only present potentialities, but also reveal challenges. Spirituality and Leadership has been criticized, "because its ethereal and abstract nature" (Fernando, 2011, p. 489), and its meaning has been characterized as unclear (Barling, Christie, & Turner, 2008; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Moreover, to make the concept even murkier, there are disagreements among researchers about whether the concept should even be linked with religion (Benefiel, 2005; Fernando, 2007; Fernando, 2011; Hicks, 2002). In this light, some researchers support a religion-based perspective of the concept (Benefiel, 2005; Dean & Safranski, 2008; Hicks, 2002) while others indicate that the concept goes beyond religiosity, opening it is "non-religion based" (Fernando, 2011, p. 485).

The lack of agreement among practitioners and researchers concerning the meanings and origins of Spirituality and Leadership call for a holistic theoretical and empirical study of Spirituality and Leadership. Despite the criticism and skepticism surrounding the concept, studies have indicated that, "Spirituality is a hot topic of research in recent times in [the] management arena" (Chawla & Guda, 2010, p. 157). Accordingly, this systematic review of the literature reconciles diverse viewpoints into a more cohesive conceptualization and definition

than has been previously attempted in the higher education context.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, scholars have begun to look at Spirituality and Leadership from different angles, with diverse viewpoints, and employing numerous methods to study the phenomenon. Scholars have attempted to define Spirituality and Leadership (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Fernando, 2011; Fry, 2003; Goethals & Sorenson, 2007; Kapuscinski & Masters 2010); to measure it (Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005; Khasawneh, Alrjoub, & Al Zawahreh, 2010); to evaluate it utilizing Rojas's (2002) scale (Malik & Naeem, 2011; Usman & Danush, 2010); to seek deeper understanding of spirituality in the workplace through Islamic lenses (Kamil, 2011); to explore the phenomenon via Fry's (2005) causal theory (Chen, Yang, & Li, 2012; Javanmard, 2012); and via KMO - Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and hierarchical linear models (Bhunia & Das, 2012), and in different organizational contexts (Fry, Clinebell, & Krahnke, 2017; Jahandar, Tafreshi, Rassouli, Atashzadeh-Shoorideh, & Kavousi, 2017).

Overall, research seems to confirm Spirituality and Leadership as an emerging perspective, which appears to have gained momentum in the past decade (Fernando, 2011; Yang & Fry, 2018). Strikingly; however, despite the recent literature and interest on the topic, the concept of Spirituality and Leadership still lacks interdisciplinary collaboration, empirical research, and qualitative analyses. Fernando (2011) advocated that, "more empirical studies on spiritual leadership need to link with established concepts, constructs and variables from other fields linked to spirituality" (p. 490). In addition, it appears that not much is known about the impact of Spirituality and Leadership from a practitioner viewpoint or its potentialities in higher education or in large North American corporations.

While researchers have studied Spirituality and Leadership for decades (Fry, 2003), more cross-cultural studies are needed (Fernando, 2011). In this light, it seems that further studies of Spirituality and Leadership should perhaps seek to address the topic with multiple lenses, methods, and approaches, perhaps employing a holistic view where variables, such as environment, leaders, followers, spirituality, and situations, are viewed as connected. Its use may offer a higher-level meta-type view that transcends the definitional differences of Spirituality and Leadership.

In summary, this section presented the significance of Spirituality and Leadership as an emerging concept. The literature review provided an overview of some of the methods and models that scholars are applying to study the concept. It concludes that future studies should actively contribute towards a clarification of its meanings and to address the skepticism surrounding Spirituality and Leadership. Ultimately, utilizing large-scale, empirical, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies may also be an important step towards validation and clarification of the concept (Fernando, Beale, & Geroy, 2009). Such studies could illuminate what may be the hidden factors behind what motivates organizations and leaders on whether or not to embrace Spirituality and Leadership and contribute to a better understanding of the concept in the context of higher education.

Empirical Studies of Leadership and Spirituality

As previously noted, in today's fast-changing society, Spirituality and Leadership may be crucial for societal and organizational needs (Aydin & Ceylan, 2009). As Fernando (2011) indicated, "A spirituality-driven leadership approach can serve to create a much-needed balance between enhancement of profits, people and the planet" (p. 483). Over the past decade, empirical research related to Spirituality and Leadership have gained momentum and has attracted interest from scholars worldwide (Miles, Sledge, & Coppage, 2008; Nafei, 2018). Throughout the years, researchers have conducted extensive literature reviews seeking to explain Spirituality and

Leadership in the workplace (Bhuniah & Das, 2012; Dean & Safranski, 2008; Hicks, 2002; Khasawneh, Alrjoub, & Zawahreh, 2010) and to consider the values and attitudes associated with leaders (Clemmons & Fields, 2011; Huang & Shih, 2011).

Quantitative methods appear to lead as the preferred method of study for Spirituality and Leadership (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Gehrke, 2008; Karadağ, 2009; Petchsawang & Duchon 2009). For instance, Karadağ (2009) investigated 2,447 primary school educators employed in 32 elementary schools in Turkey. The goal of the study was to investigate the spiritual leadership behaviors of school principals utilizing quantitative methods, applying Fry's (2003) Spiritual Leadership Scale and Open Systems theory (Karadağ, 2009). The author studied educators' perceptions of principals, focusing on "spiritual leadership behaviors and its connection to organizational culture, to test a developed independent theoretical model" (Karadağ, 2009, p. 1,396). This study is important, as it shed light on and made connections between Spirituality and Leadership and organizational culture, suggesting that, "peace affects organizational culture strongly" (Karadağ, 2009, p. 1,399).

Similarly, Petchsawang and Duchon (2009) utilized quantitative methods to survey spirituality at work in a Thai organization in the "western work context" (p. 465). Petchsawang and Duchon's study is significant not only because it adds to the limited body of literature for the cultural understanding of the Spirituality and Leadership, like Karadağ's (2009) study, but also because it addresses the need to study large industries, seeking to redefine the definition of the concept. Such an approach, perhaps, opens the door for more studies of this nature, with a wider scope and by employing larger samples.

Likewise, Usman and Danush (2010) conducted quantitative research employing Rojas' (2002) Spirituality Assessment Scale to study the "Spiritual Consciousness" addressing banking managers (p. 65). The results of the study indicated a substantial positive impact of spirituality to employee satisfaction, suggesting that the infusion of spirituality into the culture of an organization leads to a greater sense of satisfaction in its members, ultimately making them more effective in contributing to the organization's success (Usman & Danush, 2010, p. 69).

Pawar (2013) also presented an interesting quantitative empirical study. The author investigated 170 participants in an Indian context, examining the effects of leader's individual spirituality and organizational spirituality, seeking to understand leadership spiritual behaviors toward followers (Pawar, 2013, p. 1,180). The results indicated that, "The significance of leader's individual spirituality in accounting for the leader's spiritual behaviors toward subordinates...provide quite a few directions for future research as well as implications for practice" (Pawar, 2013, p. 1,181). This study is original, as it addressed a "new area of inquiry linking spirituality-related antecedents to LSB [leadership Spiritual Behavior] toward subordinates" (Pawar, 2013, p. 1,181). Higher education organizations and scholars interested in Spirituality and Leadership may benefit from this study by approaching Spirituality and Leadership through leadership or follower behavior.

In another notable study, Kamil, Al-Kahtani, and Sulaiman (2011) quantitatively studied 405 Muslim workers in 50 organizations in Malaysia. The study addressed "socio-cultural and religious contexts, and specifically from the Islamic perspectives" (Kamil et al., 2011, p. 174). The authors utilized "SPSS (version 18.0) for Principal component analysis (PCA) and AMOS (version 18.0) for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)" to study spirituality in the workplace with Islamic lenses (Kamil, 2011, p. 174). The study is significant as scholars and professionals may use the findings of this research to rationalize their efforts in designing, developing, and implementing appropriate learning and performance improvement interventions, so that Islamic spirituality could be improved among Muslim employees (Kamil, 2011).

Moreover, Fry, Hannah, Noel, and Walumbwa (2011) presented an interesting investigation of emerging leaders in the military, seeking to examine the “dynamic relationship between spiritual leadership and spiritual well-being” (p. 259). This study is important as it sought to empirically validate Fry’s (2003) definition of Spirituality and Leadership. The authors applied structural equation modeling and the findings indicated a “positive and significant relationship between spiritual leadership and several unit-level outcomes, including organizational commitment” (Fry, et al., 2011, p. 259). This study is practical for organizations and scholars seeking a definition of Spirituality and Leadership that has been empirically tested and to make connections between Spirituality and Leadership and productivity. It is also an important study as it indicated that, “positive relationships found between meaning/calling and organizational commitment and perceptions of group productivity further attest to the practical importance of spiritual leadership in establishing a strong sense of meaning/calling in groups” (Fry, et al., 2011, p. 267).

In terms of qualitative research methods, it appears that qualitative studies are slowly but steadily starting to appear and are joining the array of existing quantitative studies of Spirituality and Leadership. Most of the significant recent qualitative research published in the past five years; however, has been conducted outside North America. For instance, Ngunjiri (2010) qualitatively studied women leaders in Kenya, utilizing observations and interviews to seek connections between the data collected from the women and the literature on Spirituality and Leadership. Ngunjiri’s (2010) study demonstrated “how leaders can employ their identity – including their spiritual identity – in their leadership practice, thus becoming more authentic leaders by being able to act from deeply held spiritual values” (p. 764). From a practitioner viewpoint, this study highlights that leaders may utilize the deeply held beliefs of their various identities, including their spiritual identity, to bring authenticity to the leadership practice. The author’s research provides significant theoretical applicability of Spirituality and Leadership, as it also addresses gender and social justice as it relates to the concept, thus providing important and useful perspectives for researchers. In addition, practitioners may “relate to the women’s stories and be both informed and inspired towards their own social justice leadership” (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. 755). Furthermore, the authors indicated that, “the value of such studies is immense in expanding our understanding of leadership theory and practice beyond the current canon” (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. 765).

Similarly, but with an organizational focus, Vasconcelos (2011) conducted a case study of the Brazilian financial company, Serasa Experian. The study concluded that, “Serasa Experian has pursued an organizational spirituality orientation, yet it has somewhat lost its impetus toward it” (p. 365). The implications and practicalities of such studies are numerous. For example, upon reading this study, organizations and scholars may decide to explore possibilities of conducting a longitudinal study of the concept, since no known qualitative empirical studies appear to have selected such a method to address Spirituality and Leadership. Higher education organizations and leaders alike interested in implementing Spirituality and Leadership may consider making it a priority to reevaluate their organization’s culture to avoid losing “its impetus toward it,” as what appears to have happened at Serasa Experian in Brazil.

Spirituality and Leadership: From Theory to Current Practices

Pawar (2009) quantitatively examined the interactive effects of “meaning in work, community at work, and positive organizational purpose” in workplace spirituality and individual spirituality, along with its possible relationship with “job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment” (p. 459). Pawar’s study showed that “individual spirituality will moderate the effect of workplace spirituality aspects on work attitudes” (p. 459).

This study is original as it provides possible practical and theoretical implications for the understanding and expansion of Spirituality and Leadership as, “the findings can provide some relevant inputs for leadership actions and organization development efforts aimed at implementing workplace spirituality in organizations” (Pawar, 2009, p. 459).

In answering a call for qualitative studies, Fernando, Beale, and Geroy (2009) qualitatively examined leader spirituality and its impacts on organizations “against the current discussion of spiritual leadership in general, and the transcendental leadership model” (p. 522). Employing a grounded theory design, the authors suggested “that a spiritually driven leader's high internal locus, a strong passion for giving and caring for his followers, and spirituality epitomize the concept of transcendental leadership” as it “assesses the functionality of a spirituality-driven business leader as early evidence of the viability of the concept of transcendental leadership” (Fernando et al., 2009, p. 522). Fernando and colleagues also described it as delivering possible practical and theoretical implications for the understanding and expansion of Spirituality and Leadership, as it “provides an alternative way of characterizing spiritually oriented leaders, as they strive to integrate spirituality to all aspects of their life” (Fernando, et al., 2009, p. 522). In summary, these two last sections placed a focus on the presentation and analysis of recent empirical research related to Spirituality and Leadership and applicability. Theory, research methods, and implications of empirical studies were identified and discussed.

An Emerging Leadership Perspective in Organizations and Higher Education

What motivates organizations to implement Spirituality and Leadership, if any motivation can be found, is not empirically known. From an organizational viewpoint, Spirituality and Leadership has been gaining acceptance among large organizations such as Google and General Mills (Hall, 2013), however, Spirituality and Leadership has also expanded to the field of higher education. For example, the Maharishi University of Management has implemented and even based its flagship brand on spirituality and non-religion-based practices of “consciousness-based education,” requiring transcendental meditation as part of its curriculum and organizational culture for more than four decades (Schmidt, Heaton, & Steingard, 2000). Other higher education institutions, such as Northeastern University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, are also encouraging Spirituality and Leadership on campus, but appearing to do so at a more reserved speed, via the creation of physical spaces for spirituality practices (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006).

Clarifying Leadership and Spirituality in Higher Education and Beyond

In terms of implementation and practice, many higher education organizations are carefully seeking ways to distinguish religion and spirituality in the workplace. This is perhaps in direct response to the ambiguities surrounding the religious aspects of the Spirituality and Leadership. It may be that the advancement and trajectory of Spirituality and Leadership will rest in how well researchers clarify its religious aspects, whether in higher education or in other kinds of organizations. As noted thus far, spirituality and religion are primarily seen in two different ways: as an entwined entity (Dean & Safranski, 2008) and as separated units (Fernando, 2011). Therefore, reconciling these viewpoints into a clear and cohesive approach to conceptualizing Spirituality and Leadership is an important goal for both practitioners and scholars in the 21st Century. One way to start clarifying this concept is via a brief examination of 21st Century legal factors.

External Factors: Leadership, Spirituality, and the Law in the 21st Century

Despite the various controversies and disagreements surrounding Spirituality and Leadership's origins, the 21st Century has certainly ignited a scholarly interest in Spirituality and Leadership (Cavanagh & Bandsuch, 2002; Fry, 2003; Fry, 2005; Hicks, 2002; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Rojas 2002; Yang & Fry, 2018). In this light, it may be highly pertinent to mention the 2002 clarification of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, known as the "Workplace Religious Freedom Act of 2002," under Title VII (Title VII, 2002, S. 257). It appears that much of the academic conversation and organizational interest in Spirituality and Leadership occurred around the same time the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was clarified. In 2002, Senator Kerry clarified the language of the religious accommodation amendment of 1989, known as the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making the narrow language of Title VII more encompassing with the word "practices," thus indicating that the workplace must provide accommodation of both religious beliefs and "practices" (Title VII, 2002, S. 257). Around the time that the act was clarified, it appears that some scholars, such as Fry (2003), started to place significant importance on Spirituality and Leadership research.

It is not known what influence the amendment had on how and why organizations started to place more emphasis on Spirituality and Leadership during that period, if any at all, so this might be a topic for further research. As Fernando (2011) suggested, an examination of the "influential business leaders who actively adopt a Spirituality and Leadership approach to leading organizations" may be necessary as the concept advances and to fully understand Spirituality and Leadership motivations (p. 490).

When considering the potentialities and challenges surrounding this emerging concept in higher education and beyond, it is clear further investigation is warranted, not only in terms of its definition, applicability, and validity, but also considering what may or may not motivate organizations to embrace Spirituality and Leadership in the 21st Century. Such research may contribute to the scholarly and practitioner discussion and could shed more light on the religious or non-religious taxonomy of Spirituality and Leadership.

Spirituality and Leadership: Towards a Definition

The literature presents several definitions of Spirituality and Leadership (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Fernando, 2011; Goethals & Sorenson, 2007; Yang & Fry, 2018). Scholars contend that there seems to be no agreement on its definition (Goethals & Sorenson, 2007). The desire to pursue a definitional consensus for Spirituality and Leadership lead Kapuscinski and Masters (2010) to a critical examination of the existing status of Spirituality and Leadership's definitions through existing literature utilizing "PsycINFO and PsycArticles computer databases to obtain peer-reviewed journal articles" (p. 193). This approach appeared to confirm the lack of consensus in the definition of spirituality and how that definition relates to religiousness (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010). Nonetheless Kapuscinski and Masters presented no new definition based on their findings. Despite the disagreement, it appears that, in general, the concept of Spirituality and Leadership leans toward service and attention to well-being (Fernando, 2011; Fry, 2003). The idea of Spirituality and Leadership also seems to suggest notions of "responsible leadership" as an important focus (Fernando, 2011, p. 489).

Moreover, the Spirituality and Leadership concept appears to place importance on humanity, suggesting that it provides "greater meaning at work, superior ethical practices" (Fernando, 2011; Fry, Matherly & Ouimet, 2010). Considering the literature and for this paper, Fry's (2003) definition appears to encompass much of how most researchers seem to characterize the concept. Fry (2003) defined Spirituality and Leadership, "as comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one's self and others

so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership” (p. 694).

Given these definitions, the authors of this review suggest a definition of Spiritual Leadership in the higher education context that is aligned with the purpose of most higher education institutions in the 21st Century—to educate responsible citizens for a better world, regardless of religion, national origin, race, color, and/or sex; and suggest a few conceptualizations.

Spiritual Leadership in the context of higher education should be viewed as a mindful and conscious non-religious-based enlightened practice of compassionate, peaceful, and loving leadership. Instead of spirituality necessarily being associated with a particular religious worldview or ideology, this term’s definition would be inclusive and flexible enough to include varying belief systems, whether it relates to a faith in an external supernatural being, an inward-focused humanistic perspective, or other ways to conceive of “spirit.”

This type of leadership would embody and promote spiritual development much in the same way Love and Talbot (1999) proposed as a definition for spiritual development, being (1) “an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development” (p. 617); (2) “...transcending one’s current locus of centrality” (p. 618); (3) “...developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community” (p. 618); (4) “...involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life” (p. 619); and “...involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing” (p. 620). Within that conception, Spiritual Leadership could involve practices that embrace differences for a better and more just academy—practices that foster conditions for stakeholders (faculty, students, administrators, community, staff, and others) from different cultures and walks of life to flourish from within and live out their purposes in life within their higher education organizations and their broader communities.

Therefore, we propose the following understanding for the higher education context: Spirituality and Leadership within higher education involves personal characteristics and practices, as well as developmental aims. It is a leadership concept in which spirituality is broadly and inclusively defined, that would seem to stretch beyond rationality and physical states of being toward an intangible essence that makes each person unique. As such, the spiritual aspect from which this leadership would stem would be largely self-defined, often making that aspect difficult to identify in others, however, the concept becomes more apparent in its application and practices.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of Spirituality and Leadership considering theoretical conceptualizations and empirical research. The study of Spirituality and Leadership and overview of the scholarly discussion surrounding theory and practice in this paper shows that the Spirituality and Leadership concept has expanded over time from its possible religious or cultural roots (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Fernando, 2011). However, despite such progress and advancement, its definition is still not clear (Chawla & Guda, 2010), particularly in the higher education context. Therefore, the authors proposed the following understanding for this context: Spirituality and Leadership within higher education involves personal characteristics and practices, as well as developmental aims. It is a leadership concept in which spirituality is broadly and inclusively defined, that would seem to stretch beyond rationality and physical states of being toward an intangible essence that makes each person unique. As such, the spiritual aspect from which this leadership would stem would be largely self-defined, often

making that aspect difficult to identify in others, however, the concept becomes more apparent in its application and practices.

The application and practice of Spirituality and Leadership within higher education would involve the leader's striving to understand her own spiritual nature and authentically living and leading in a consistent and congruent way for the benefit of others in her educational community. Leading in this way would help students and institutional colleagues in development of their own spiritual leadership, very much making it an educational process to help in the holistic development of individuals and the broader campus community. It is this educational process that differentiates Spirituality and Leadership in higher education from different contexts.

The review of the methods and models used to study Spirituality and Leadership also confirmed Fernando's (2011) suggestion that studies involving Spirituality and Leadership tend mostly to be of a quantitative nature (p. 489). However, this paper also shows that despite the predominance of quantitative studies, new methods have been employed to study the phenomenon, especially outside North America in the past five years (Ngunjiri, 2010; Vaconcelos, 2011).

The literature also showed that as in any practice, organizations that start with a Spirituality and Leadership approach may or may not keep the approach in the long run (Vasconcelos, 2011), thus, suggesting that Spirituality and Leadership may be situational and could become only a trend in an organization (Vasconcelos, 2011). As Biberman (2009) stated, "It should be noted that organizations change, just as people do, and their levels of spirituality may go up or down because of various factors, such as mergers, acquisitions, leadership or directional changes, and the like" (p. 115). In light of this review of empirical, theoretical and practical scope, the literature indicated an apparent need of a holistic approach to study the concept.

Currently, Spirituality and Leadership as an emerging perspective is an important and applicable theme in organizations (Ngunjiri, 2010). This review of empirical, theoretical and practical literature appears to validate the notion of Spirituality and Leadership as an emerging perspective with significance in the context of higher education, as it has been a topic of discussion both in theory and in practice, especially within the past few years.

Ultimately, it appears that Spirituality and Leadership may have the potential to be an answer to a much-needed meaningful leadership in higher education organizations. Nonetheless, as Benefiel (2005) noted, "Over time organizations cited as being spiritual may lose some of their spiritual characteristics" (p. 116). In this vein, as the conceptualization Spirituality and Leadership progresses in the context of higher education, more scholarly and practitioner contributions, as it concerns large qualitative longitude studies, applying multiple lenses or holistic approaches, may be essential for the advancement in the higher educational the context.

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