

Meaning, Needs, and Workplace Spirituality

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Abstract: Human resource management and leadership are often required to create, sustain, and manage meaning in the workplace. Spirituality in the workplace is a focal idea in this context but lacks conceptual clarity. This article examines the general logic of the concept by analyzing its prevalent definitions and their implications, investigating its legitimization, examining links to the psychological contract and examining potential outcomes. Inherent paradoxes and ethical and practical issues are shown that call for a re-evaluation of the concept, for which alternative routes are outlined. Practical and philosophical questions requiring further investigation are highlighted to structure future research.

Keywords: workplace spirituality; employer-employee relations; individual differences; leadership

1. Introduction

Increasing demands and pressures on employees and managers can alter their expectations regarding the workplace, leading to changes in the psychological contract [1], which encompasses the mutual and reciprocal ‘implicit and explicit understandings that employees and employers bring to their jobs’ [2]. These include, e.g., meaningful work [3–5] and work-life balance [6], which call for more holistic leadership and its development [7], plus more individualized approaches [8,9]. The responsibility of those in human resource (HR) management (HRM) and leadership roles is very high in this context, as they are expected to become managers and communicators of meaning, facilitating sensemaking as ‘sharing of meaning’ [10], especially in VUCA conditions [11,12] and change [1], seeking to ensure positive outcomes for both the individuals and the organization [4,13].

Several approaches are suggested for providing and ensuring meaning creation in the workplace, especially in leadership as such [14,15] and employee empowerment through participatory leadership and intrapreneurship [16]. Leadership and sensemaking are connected to moral legitimacy and the sacred, highlighting interdependencies [17]. Spirituality in the workplace is much discussed as a suitable concept for creating and sustaining meaning, and a sense of belonging in the workplace that can cover all three classic HR levels—the individual, the group, and the organization—plus potentially even more. However, its role is not yet completely outlined [18], and it inherits practical and theoretical issues and paradoxes that need to be addressed [19,20]. It is imperative for HRM practices and theories to make more informed decisions on whether and how to employ the ideas the concept puts forward.

To do so, this theoretical article first outlines the definitions of spirituality in the workplace and their potential effects. Then, the general logic, legitimization and paradoxes are investigated, covering the conception of the human being and the scope of conceptual application possibilities. To conclude, pressing open questions and routes for research are outlined.

2. Materials and Methods

Being a conceptual piece and thus theoretical, the materials used in this article are the definitions of workplace spirituality and their implications. These are presented in this



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section (for an overview, see Table 1). This article examines the concept's foundations and their implications in general plus regarding the psychological contract specific with critical reflexivity, which 'brings assumptions underpinning practice to the surface, provides a way of thinking more critically about the effects of such practice, and encourages (or supports) the design of alternative ways of organizing' [21]. The latter are sought in the context of re-thinking and re-examining 'the role of organizations, organizing and managing in society' [22] in the tradition of sensemaking as 'the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing' [23], using a representational lens [24]. Subsequently, the materials are closely examined and analyzed regarding their content to highlight critical issues based on the literature in the field. The results of this are shown in Section 3.

While the direct enactment of beliefs in the workplace is treated in the faith at work discourse, see e.g., [25], spirituality is a much broader concept not necessarily linked to a specific faith or religion. However, there are overlaps, mainly due to the idea of sacredness and a focus on community. Religion has been defined by Durkheim [26] as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (p. 44), placing an emphasis on collectivity. Members of this structured collective have to follow certain rules [27] and display specific, codified behaviors. Durkheim [26] calls these rites, 'rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things' (p. 38). This prepares the basis for a more modern definition of religion as 'codified spirituality', legitimized in its means and methods of searching for sacredness by a collective, and potentially also including non-sacred upstream goals [28]. Leadership can draw on these potentials [17], using spirituality instead of religion to avoid conflicts [29–31], tensions and paradoxes [32], and legal challenges.

However, spirituality in the workplace and, thus, potential management tools lack a common definition [33–35]. Though overviews of definitions are provided [34,36–39], the lack of a common one 'insulates (. . .) from critique' [40] and makes it very difficult to compare the outcomes of the studies on spirituality in the workplace. Moreover, this challenges the practical application of it by organizations. In addition, some definitions are inherently problematic in their application, measurement, or scope. This can lead to various potential un-intended consequences in research and practice, which highlights the necessity of clarifying the concept and the implications of the definitions.

2.1. Organizational Culture

The foundational parts of organizational culture, according to Schein [41], are basic assumptions, norms and values, plus artifacts. The basic assumptions are formed on the grounds of how the organization best survived in a certain context and inform the norms and values, which can be viewed as what is desirable [42]. Thus, culture is a result of past sensemaking and holds an organization together with

'[s]ystems of value standards (. . .) and other patterns of culture, when institutionalized in social systems and internalized in personality systems, guide the actor with respect to both the orientation to ends and the normative regulation of means and of expressive activities, whenever the need-dispositions of the actor allow choices in these matters' [43] (p. 56).

The more external diversity and complexity persist, the more internal complexity reduction [44] or a unifying element is required, as perceiving a difference [45] is needed for making distinctions possible, e.g., between 'them' and 'us'. To become part of the latter, socialization within the organization (referred to as indoctrination by Mintzberg [46]) serves as a tool for standardizing this normatively sanctioned organizational behavior. Moral rules, according to Durkheim [47], automatically develop where a group is being formed. For new members, becoming introduced to this sociomaterial practice is necessary to make sense of it, act on it [24], and determine the degree of value congruence.

In line with this, Jurkiewicz and Giacalone [48] suggest '[c]onfiguring workplace spirituality as a measurable aspect of an organization's culture, working in unison to provide a sense of continuity with the world through one's work processes.' Refining an earlier working definition as 'framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy' [39], they link it to benevolence, generativity, humanism, integrity, justice, mutuality, receptivity, respect, responsibility and trust [48].

Ethical and value-based person-environment fit [49] is connected to employee well-being [50] and to the experienced fulfillment of the psychological contract [51]. Though norms can be used as the main coordination mechanism [46], tensions at the personal level might occur due to personal religious or spiritual struggles [29]. According to the ASA Theory [52], employees with a high value fit would stay in the organization. The consequences are diverse and range from increased motivation [53] to the dangers of group dynamics phenomena, such as 'groupthink' [54], and a higher likelihood of unethical behavior thought to benefit the organization [55].

2.2. Employee Spiritual Needs and Sacred Issues

Needs, according to Kalleberg [56], 'refer to the objective requirements of an organism's well-being'. Employee need satisfaction has been discussed in the literature as influencing leadership effectiveness [57] and is the central element of engaging leadership [57,58], with the goal of satisfying competence, autonomy, elation needs [59] and resulting in engaged leaders.

'first: inspire their followers (e.g., by enthusing them for their vision and plans, and by make [sic] them feel that they contribute to an important mission); second, strengthen their followers (e.g., by granting them freedom and responsibility, and by delegating tasks); third, connect their followers (e.g., by encouraging collaboration and by promoting a high team spirit)' [58].

Though uniquely human needs are being discussed [60], spiritual needs might be a candidate for the latter [61,62] but are thought to differ between individuals [53,63]. Duchon and Plowman [53] are the needs of the inner life [53], which 'can be nourished by meaningful work in a larger context of community' [53], leading to the definition of spiritual needs as needs 'for an inner dimension to life, for meaningful work and for community' [53], which equals the definition of Schaufeli [58] given above. Taking into account the elements highlighted, it is possible in an adequate climate created and fostered by management, drawing on the fact that spirituality is something personal and perceptual [38]. This psychological climate is equal to spirituality in the workplace [53]. However, only people who view themselves as having a spiritual dimension in their inner life would feel motivated there [53], which requires careful analysis regarding the expectations of the employees regarding their workplace and its values to ensure congruence [1].

Since the inner life is related to social identity and self-concept, which are intertwined and need to be reflected and refined in social exchange, '[w]orkplace spirituality can be viewed, then, as a consequence of the self-concept at work and the social identity that is derived from work unit membership' [53]. Leaders play a crucial role in making the latter attractive; for example, by allowing for co-creation [64,65] and engaging in caring leadership [66], which can be contested as controlling [67]. Caring for employee needs in HRM can lead to positive organizational individuals and organizational outcomes [68] and can be connected to secular as well as sacred issues [17].

Spirituality in the workplace has been conceptualized in some lines of work [69] as a journey towards understanding the self in connection to the sacred [70] or 'search for the sacred' [28]. As religion provides a foundation [31] and legitimized means for doing so [28], faith-based organizations may find it easier or more natural to follow this view [71]. When conceptualized in a naturalistic way, however, the sacred becomes a frame for sensemaking, cohesion and identity available for organizations in general to be used

by leadership [17]. People striving to express themselves holistically is exactly what the concept of spirituality in the workplace aims at postulating, acknowledging, and/or using. Spirituality in the workplace as a search for the sacred implies a certain normative as well as motivational view of human beings as explicitly wanting to engage in spiritual matters in the workplace [72,73], at least to a certain degree.

The sacred is also an aesthetic category in organizational studies, clarifying that reality and fiction in human experience are not clearly separated [74]. Referring to reflections on the invisible and unsayable, the sacred 'derives from a relationship with the divine and its power' (p. 25) but is not 'morally determined' or 'above the human faculties' [74]. A whole organization's, except certain elements of it [17,75], reputation or professional competence can be viewed as sacred [74]. Durkheim [26] notes that 'anything (. . .) can be sacred' and will then be 'protected and isolated by prohibition' (p. 38), entailing dangers for spirituality in the workplace. As soon as something is defined as sacred, it is fixed normatively and questioning its foundation can become taboo [75]. Harrison and colleagues [75] argue that the sacred is socially constructed via seeking, providing and legitimizing meaning in the organizational context, creating a kind of covenant between the individual and the organization. Thus, the sacred becomes an integral part of current perspectives on spirituality in the workplace that focus on meaning. However, normatively fixing work-related issues as the ultimate expression of meaning might come at the expense of other areas of life. This is connected to the idea of sacrifice. Sacrifice for the sacred is

'the subordination of private utility to common utility, whatever it may be, always has a moral character, for it necessarily implies sacrifice and abnegation' [26].

Whatever is defined as sacred is valuable enough to be achieved even if doing so is costly for the individual and maybe ultimately the collective, although sacrifice is important for social cohesion [76].

Alluding to transaction costs, Simmel [77] suggests economic life can be interpreted 'as interaction in the specific sense of an exchange of sacrifices' (p. 80). However, at least in a religious context [78], something or someone can be sacrificed in a substitutional way and 'restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane' (p. 55) 'to save the rest from a mortal danger of contagion' (p. 59). In the context of this paper, sacrificing ethical convictions for illegitimate actions is thought to benefit the organization [55], but also excess working, sacrificing one's self and/or family time for career matters or out of feelings of responsibility towards clients (for example, in healthcare) or colleagues (in troubled economic times, phases of personnel shortage, etc.) come to mind. Often, people who work sacrificially are valued and spoken of very highly, becoming modern saints and martyrs. The validity of these sacrifices, however, has to be contested [79]. Frequently, they are not even wanted and are officially discouraged by the organization. This opens up the question of what socially ascribed responsibilities an organization has to fulfill. Connected to this is the question of where to draw the line between the individual and the organization [80] to avoid unhealthy developments or dependencies in the context of searching for the sacred.

2.3. Multi-Dimensional Constructs

A third way to define spirituality in the workplace is by decomposing it into dimensions [37], though these are defined differently [81]. Three component suggestions are frequency; for example, searching for transcendence of self, holism plus harmony and growth [73]. Another regularly used version of dimensions states that spirituality at the workplace is composed of 'three components: the inner life, meaningful work, and community' [82]. However, when measuring the concept (the difficulty in measuring component-based concepts is highlighted in the literature [37]), the authors found four additional factors that they could link to the hypothesized three, but that differed in their empirical clarity depending on the level of analysis (individual, group or organization (for a brief overview of the work conducted regarding levels, see Pirkola and colleagues [34])). Based on their work, some researchers, such as Milliman and colleagues [83], chose to

operate with four aspects—adding the values factor found by Ashmos and Duchon [82] to their original three. Others stayed with three, but summed up meaningful work, a sense of community and alignment with organizational values [84]. McKee [84] and Majeed et al. [72] described the elements in more detail, and the former also highlighted the elements as such, which are not new to research. This raises the question of (a) why, then, is this configuration required, and (b) what happens to jobs where these elements are not provided or possible, for example, in non-team-based, highly individualized jobs. Are these automatically less spiritual or do the dimensions have to be adjusted to the job type? Moreover, does spirituality in the workplace have to be attached to the job or can it also lie in the means to be achieved by the job or in the meaning attached to it by the worker [85]? As a matter of fact, this may be external, for example, by providing for the family.

Thus far, the predominant focus of the current discourse on spirituality in organizational studies has been on ‘Western mainstream Christianity’ [22]. Scales were developed mainly in Western and Asian contexts, sometimes with overlaps [86]. A recent study on the dimensions of workplace spirituality in a Vedic/Buddhist-oriented context found nine dimensions: altruistic motive, interpersonal positivity, compassion, inner calmness, duty orientation, sense of collaboration, interconnectedness, self-regulation and higher consciousness. While this is more specific when referring to value dimensions, it is interesting to note that meaningful work is not explicitly mentioned but either is irrelevant as work is based on duty or may be defined as such if the values are shared [87]. However, in a validation study of a scale originally developed based on Western approaches, meaningful work was a dimension, in addition to compassion, mindfulness and transcendence [86]. An investigation of Turkish companies also revealed three themes of spirituality in the workplace: a shared search for meaning, interconnectedness and shared responsibility for the spiritual (The authors coined the expression ‘corporate spiritual responsibility’ [63]. Applying the broader perspective of well-being of stakeholders, Vasconcelos [88], argues not taking this into account but engaging in the opposite makes an organization non-spiritually-based) well-being of all stakeholders. Depending on prevalent triggers, all three can have positive and negative outcomes [63].

2.4. An Evasive Concept

As shown above, the definitions of workplace spirituality have a high degree of overlap with (good) organizational culture, (motivation) need theories, and holistic well-being [34,38], which all need to be filled with content depending on national and organizational culture plus employee expectations of fulfilling the psychological contract. Though relevant for all definitions, leadership has many responsibilities when multi-dimensional definitions are employed, as the focus must be on many aspects. To make matters more complex, the dimensions, antecedents and implications of the spirituality of the workplace can be analyzed on various levels [89], for example, the organization, the group, and/or the individual, while the bulk of studies so far have focused on the latter [34]. In addition, the conceptual overlaps of spirituality in the workplace and aspects of sensemaking—especially the levels of sensemaking [90] and immanent sensemaking [24]—become apparent in several definitions and can be summed up by referring to Karakas and Srigollu [63] who ‘view spirituality (. . .) a dynamic process of meaning making through autopoiesis or self-styling, which involves constant complex negotiations with one’s own self and values, as well as continuous interactions with others in the social system’.

This implies a very fluid identity. Thus, the conception of the human being [61] together with other critical issues arising from the implications outlined above require examination.

Table 1. Overview of Definitions and Implications.

Religion and Spirituality			
	Definition	Related Theoretical Concepts and Ideas	Potentials of Preferring Spirituality over Religion at the Workplace
	Religion as ‘codified spirituality’, legitimized in its means and methods of searching for the sacred by a collective, potentially including non-sacred upstream goals (Hill et al., 2000) [28].	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The sacred (see below) - Rites (Durkheim 1995) [26] - Structured, moral community (Durkheim 1995) [26] - Rules (Byrne, Morton, and Dahling 2011) [27] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoiding conflicts (Exline and Bright 2011; Benefiel, Fry and Geigle 2014; Cavanagh and Bandsuch 2002) [29–31] - Reducing tensions and paradoxes (Gümüşay 2021) [32] - Diminishing legal challenges
Workplace Spirituality			
Aspect	Definition	Related theoretical concepts and ideas	Potential dangers and benefits
Organizational culture	Workplace spirituality as a ‘framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy’ (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003, p. 13) [39] and ‘a measurable aspect of an organization’s culture, working in unison to provide a sense of continuity with the world through one’s work processes.’ (Jurkiewicz and Giacalone 2004, p. 130) [48]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sensemaking (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2020) [24] - Basic assumptions, values, norms, artefacts (Schein 1984) [41] - Survival - Values as the desirable (Kluckhohn 2013) [42] - Guidance for and normative regulation of actors (Parsons and Shils 1951) [43] - Socialization (Mintzberg 2003) [46] - Coordination via norms (Mintzberg 2003) [46] - Moral rule development (Durkheim 1965) [47] - Ethical and value-based person-environment fit (George 2021) [49] - ASA Theory (Schneider, Goldstein and Smith 1995) [52] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tensions at the personal level due to personal religious or spiritual struggles (Exline and Bright 2011) [29] + Complexity reduction (Luhmann 1975) [44] + Well-being (Giacalone and Promislo 2010) [50] + Motivation (Duchon and Plowman 2005) [53] - ‘Groupthink’ (Janis 1971) [54] - Un-ethical behavior thought to benefit the organization (Zhang 2020) [55]

Table 1. Cont.

Workplace Spirituality			
Aspect	Definition	Related theoretical concepts and ideas	Potential dangers and benefits
Spiritual needs	Spiritual needs as needs ‘for an inner dimension to life, for meaningful work and for community’ which ‘can be nourished by meaningful work in a larger context of community’ (Duchon and Plowman 2005, p. 815) [53]. Spirituality at the workplace creates a climate allowing for these and is ‘a consequence of the self-concept at work and the social identity that is derived from work unit membership’ (Duchon and Plowman 2005, p. 812) [53].	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs (Kalleberg 1997) [56] - Engaging leadership (van Tuin, Schaufeli, and Rhnenen 2020; Schaufeli 2015) [57,58] - Social identity, self-concept - Caring leadership (Tomkins and Simpson 2015) [66] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Inspiration, Empowerment, Community building (Schaufeli 2015) [58] - Control (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte 2021) [67] + Positive individual and organizational outcomes (Saks 2022) [68]
Sacred issues	Spirituality as the workplace and the journey towards understanding the self in connection to the sacred (Karakas 2010) [70] or ‘search for the sacred’ (Hill et al., 2000, p. 66) [28]. The sacred can be anything (Durkheim, 1995) [26], the whole organization or elements of it (Worley 2018; Harrison, Ashforth, and Corley 2009) [17,75], reputation or professional competence (Strati 2000) [74].	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Religion (see above) - Sensemaking, cohesion, identity (Worley 2018) [17] - Sacrifice (Durkheim 1995) [26] - Organizational aesthetics (Strati 2000) [74] - Meaning (Harrison, Ashforth, and Corley 2009) [75] - Individual vs. Organization (Argyris 1957) [80] - Saints and martyrs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sacrificing convictions (Zhang 2020) [55] + Helpful for faith-based organizations (Delbecq 2010) [71] - Normative and potentially problematic view of human being (Majreed, Mustamil and Nazri 2018; Ashforth and Pratt 2003) [72,73] - Normative fixation of the sacred (Harrison, Ashforth and Corley 2009) [75] - Excess working hours + Social cohesion based on/due to sacrifice (Mellor and Shilling 2010) [76]

Table 1. Cont.

Workplace Spirituality			
Aspect	Definition	Related theoretical concepts and ideas	Potential dangers and benefits
Multiple dimensions	3 components:		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared search for meaning, interconnectedness, and shared responsibility for the (spiritual) well-being of all stakeholders (Karakas and Sarigollu 2019) [63]. - Searching for transcendence of self, holism plus harmony, and growth (Ashforth and Pratt 2003) [73] - ‘the inner life, meaningful work, and community’ (Ashmos and Duchon 2000, p. 137) [82] - Meaningful work, sense of community and alignment with organizational values (McKee et al., 2011) [84] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All individual elements of the definitions - Cultural and religious differences (Fotaki, Altman, and Koning 2020; Shrestha 2016) [22,86] - Levels of analysis (individual, group, and organization) (Ashmos and Duchon 2000; Neal and Bennett 2000; Pirkola et al., 2016) [34,82,89] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problematic measurement (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2010) [37] - Unclear scope and demarcation - High expectations on leaders to focus on all elements
	4 components:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘the inner life, meaningful work, and community’ (Ashmos and Duchon 2000, p. 137) [82] plus a values component (Milliman et al., 2003) [83] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meaning (Karakas and Sarigollu 2019; Frankl 1985) [63,85] - Leadership as a promoting factor
9 dimensions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vedic/Buddhist context: Altruistic Motive, Interpersonal Positivity, Compassion, Inner Calmness, Duty Orientation, Sense of Collaboration, Interconnectedness, Self-Regulation, and Higher Consciousness (Shrestha, Luitel, and Petchsawang 2020) [87] 		

3. Results

This section conceptually treats problematic aspects of the current definitions of workplace spirituality. Based on the definitions described above, inherent paradoxes, legitimization issues, conceptions of the human being and the scope of application are investigated. Spirituality in the workplace as an approach is typically highly functionalistic [91] both in its use and its argumentation and aims at an optimizing the individual, group and organization—be it via an enhancement of well-being, group coherence, various outcomes as employee retention, satisfaction, productivity, organizational citizenship behavior and/or commitment [38,70,81]. It can be in line with the general logic of management [92] but also transcend it [93]. While it seemingly only creates win-win situations [94], the evidence is not equivocal [22,95].

3.1. Paradoxes

Spirituality in the workplace is used as a sensemaking process that leads to circularity by defining what is good and resulting in the latter (see values and sensemaking aspects in Table 1). Moreover, spirituality is used as a (management) rule for reducing complexity, which also refers to organizational culture aspects. However, a complex phenomenon is hard to use as a complexity-reducing tool. Moreover, when it becomes a norm, spirituality becomes similar to religion—a codified spirituality legitimized by others. Then, it functions as a coordinating principle, integrating individual actions [96,97] and reducing coordination costs [75]. Spirituality, in this case, has the functionality to uphold the structure and also acts towards external adaptation [98]. For example, it is reported that individual resources for stressful conditions at the same time prohibit these conditions from being questioned [94] because they are either an integral aspect of the organizational culture or sacrifices that are cherished. Moreover, it frames and primes the actors in sensemaking who try to ‘get a sense of provisional stability in the continuous flow of ever-changing organizational life’ [21]. Thus, again, sensemaking—though results are not the focus of Weick [10]—reduces external [10,99] and internal complexities [24]. In addition, Tourish and Tourish [40] raise the question of whether basic shared values allowing for broad interpretation might be too shallow to base organizational decisions on. However, complex systems—and external conditions—might require latitude for a variety of reasons [100], especially when implementing HRM policies [101].

3.2. Needs Based Legitimization

The existence of organizations is often legitimized by the profit they create for shareholders, and ideally all stakeholders fulfill certain existing or future needs of society. This is also reflected in efforts to reach the triple bottom line, Corporate Social Responsibility or Workplace Health initiatives [102,103]. For profit generation, resources plus background knowledge regarding organizing and management are required, but without needs orientation, their combination would be without substance and sense, so a certain degree of overlap or fit is required.

The profits aimed at are frequently used first, to legitimize the organization outwardly and second, to do so internally with the aim of motivating employees to work towards that purposeful goal and create meaning (see Table 1, meaning-related aspects). The expectation of need-fulfillment via organizations might call for a need-fulfillment-based theory of the organization, differentiating between the type of need that is supposed to be provided for, under what conditions, and with what consequences. While products, services and revenues need related outputs to be consumed by stakeholders, how the internal processes and structures that in the end lead to these are responding to stakeholder needs is integrated in the analysis.

Should organizations be expected to provide for the need for meaning, spirituality in the workplace is one of the options to do so internally (see Table 1, spiritual needs); the external part would be the products, services and revenues. The charge against modern

management that suppresses the spirit [62] to increase efficiency would have to be dropped, as trying to manipulate and direct the spirit [104] might become the new norm.

3.3. Conception of the Human Being

In the historical development and application of management research, conceptions of the human being evolved from rather simplistic ideas of people having to be forced to work by control and incentives to needing social interaction and appreciation, motivation and meaning (motivation research, leadership) and self-actualization [82,105]. The managerial theories developed based on these reflect their time's understanding of what people want at work—which may, e.g., be spiritual need fulfillment (see Table 1)—and what can be used for the organization. Neal [106] refers to this as the organization using the 'energies' of the human being known to organizations. Thus, what was being 'bought' by the organization from the employee (labor) became more broad and complex [19,104], as did the expectations of employees and organizations regarding what ought to be 'given' by the other. When using physical energy, e.g., employee health should be safeguarded by preventing physical harm. In some countries, mental health has been included, as research has demonstrated its rising importance [107–109].

Regarding spiritual health, there are no laws or norms now except for non-discrimination due to religious orientation. It is, thus, unclear whether the organization should be allowed to address the spiritual 'energy' for its purposes, and what protective measures to take for the workforce. The line between individual and collective responsibility for need fulfillment and interdependent alignment [80,110] needs to be defined. Should the responsibility of the organization toward employee need fulfillment increase, organizations pondering investing in workplace spirituality will base their decision on feasibility and cost-benefit expectations as the demands regarding managers and leaders rise. This could result in the responsibility for spirituality being created as a job element, increasing the possibilities for exerting control [72].

3.4. Scope of Application

Depending on the definitions employed, the concepts of the human being and the aims of the organization, the scope of application of spirituality at the workplace may differ. As sensemaking takes place in the practice worlds [24], the enactment [71], the concept and spirituality have to fit (a) regarding roles: for which types of work is the concept designed, described and used, (b) regarding interdependencies: which level and type of organizational trust (based on collectivity and social capital) does spirituality require, (c) regarding stability: which degree of organizational stability does spirituality at the workplace require? These questions are discussed in the next sections.

3.4.1. Job Types

Constituting a long established fact in sociology and organizational psychology, (gainful) employment is described as a possibility to create and find meaning [111,112], which partly is a methodological artifact resulting from the focus on the workplace. The explanation of the positive impacts of spirituality at the workplace relies primarily on linking it to meaning (see meaning aspects in Table 1) and belonging needs (see notes regarding community in Table 1), whose satisfaction is promoted. Studies so far mainly refer to white collar jobs, but can also cover less skilled work [113]. Additionally, they highlight the impact of spirituality at the workplace on self-actualization, empowerment, etc. In classical managerial thought, elements of spirituality in the workplace are only sought by individuals interested in fulfilling more than just their basic needs (earning money to sustain themselves and their families).

Higher engagement with and commitment to work are linked to work-related meaning and motivation [114,115]. Typical is the widely known story of a man asking three workers at a construction site what they are doing. The first explains that he is cutting a stone, the second reports that he is building a wall and the third answers that he is building a

cathedral. In most accounts, the story's varieties, the degrees of happiness exhibited by the men asked increase (and they certainly are all engaged in a spiritual matter). Their productivity is not what is looked at. Instead, the focus of happiness in the story is on the task itself and its implicit worth for the individual, not the needs it fulfills, such as providing employment and securing a living. Nevertheless, we must refer back to the questions already posed in Section 2.3., multidimensional concepts (also see the corresponding part of Table 1, problematic aspects): Is having a vision more sacred than caring for one's direct needs? Can a spiritual interest be demanded in all workplaces? Goldt's poem and song on the 'Morganatic Mason' (A translation to English can be found at [116]), being from an upper-class family and displaying an according habitus, has a 'vision' just as the third man in the story above, but does not fit into the team of more simple masons at the construction site. He sees his work as meaningful but has no collective to share his views with. Though he is trying, 'some workplaces are just not yet susceptible' [117] regarding spirituality at the workplace, or might never be. Additionally, pre-defining meaning may invade and endanger the private sphere [40], even if the goal is congruence. Additionally, spirituality in the workplace may seem out of scope for some individuals—and even some specific industries. Should this be the case, non-discrimination must be ensured, and a clear differentiation in theory is required. This could either be established by distinguishing types of work where spirituality is (ir)relevant or by adapting the definition. The needs aspect in the definitions of spirituality might be enlarged to also encompass existence needs, and finding meaning in work could benefit from including external motivators, such as providing for a family. Otherwise, self-actualization implicitly remains more 'sacred' (see also the part on sacred issues in Table 1) than self-sustenance. Nevertheless, expanding an already very comprehensive and partly evasive definition might reduce its conceptual clarity even further.

3.4.2. Stability and Interdependencies

A certain degree of stability in the outward context is required in general to be able to act in the justified expectation of a desired outcome. Thus, phases of change are challenging, also for the overarching themes of spirituality at the workplace (mainly see multi-dimensional definitions in Table 1):

'the recognition and nurturance of one's inner life, finding meaning and purpose at work, sense of community, interconnectedness and experience of transcendence or self-transcendence' [38].

Increased stress and strain hinder a focus on the inner life, showing the importance of mentally detaching from work and promoting work-domain balance [118–120]. Adaptation processes can be perceived as endangering the organizational values, purpose and, thus, (self-)transcendence, requiring management to safeguard employees that have a higher understanding of the external and internal complexities a company operates in to avoid feelings of psychological contract violation or breaches [121] (see organizational culture part in Table 1). Damages to the psychological contract—especially in the context of downsizing—can threaten the sense of a positive future [122] and of community. While for those laid off, the psychological contract is broken [1], the survivors may suffer from increased stress and worse health [122–124] or be traumatized [1], making repair and/or negotiation necessary [125]. Thus, organizations placing importance on specific aspects or dimensions of spirituality need to protect these during times of change, as there is evidence that spirituality can serve as a buffer or coping mechanism for job-related challenges [126,127] and outward instabilities.

4. Discussion

While misusing employee spirituality needs to be discussed as unethical, its desired outcomes can be achieved by employing other concepts (also see [40,72,82]).

4.1. Alternatives

Among the various alternatives are creating a positive values-based organizational climate and culture [128,129], ensuring organizational justice [130–132] and implementing insights from motivation theories in HR activities [133,134], together with employee development [135] and increasing social capital [136]. The related theoretical concepts and ideas regarding the definitions of workplace spirituality examined here were already explained in Section 2 and are listed in the designated row in Table 1. This section gives an overview and details of the most promising alternatives.

Referring to the multidimensional concepts of spirituality in the workplace, organizational social capital covers the sub-dimensions of inter-connectedness with peers, a sense of community and meaning. The same holds true for employee well-being, which is ‘best achieved when employees are able to find a sense of meaning and purpose, experience positive social interactions combined with a sense of positive affect toward their roles, and find personal alignment of their spiritual values with their organization’ [137].

As general helpful avenues in dealing with workplace spirituality, the literature, thus, mentions focusing on (1) ethics [138–140]; (2) respectful pluralism (religion is included conceptually here [141]) [142], for example, by ensuring converging attitudes towards spirituality-related values by personnel selection; (3) partnering in the social construction of spirituality and approximating spirituality [73], e.g., by integrating the faith at work discourse [25]. While leadership plays a role in all of these avenues, it is the focal point of (4) ensuring shared values [128] and (5) engaged leadership [58,143]. Engaging leadership is inspiring, empowering and connects subordinates [58] and is closely connected to spirituality as a multidimensional construct, but also caring for spiritual needs. It can also be viewed as a determinant of employees’ perceptions of job resources and subsequent work engagement [143], which suggests engaged leadership behavior is an enactment of the psychological contract by the leader. Though a differentiation between the impact of the degree of satisfaction and the respective need type is called for, ‘engaging leaders as well as employees’ positive affective state of being engaged, are essential to shaping a resourceful work context’ [143].

All these concepts can be employed to reduce complexity (also see organizational culture in Table 1) by creating collective, interdependent, coordinated action and patterns of action [144], fostering a sense of belonging [145] and shared values. Certainly, the organizational culture would be instrumentalized by doing so [110]—However, organizational culture as well as personnel development can be instrumentalized in many ways. As Ashfort and Pratt noted [73] ‘spirituality (. . .) is necessarily about the individual’ but ‘an organization (. . .) can prompt an individual’s journey, channel his or her path, and suggest the ‘appropriate’ lessons to be derived’. One solution here might be to opt for (Cavellian) perfectionism, which also argues for an organizational culture that fosters a deeper understanding of oneself and personal progress. This is established through discourse (here: at work) and focuses on the inner life [18], which could lead to a more open approach and could be studied using systems psychodynamics, which explicitly values heterogeneity and increases the scope of inquiry regarding the inner world of people towards interdependent influences of systems of organizing and internal psychological and social dynamics [146]. Nevertheless, one would need to trust—or hope—that people are mature enough to not only be honest with each other and themselves, but also polite. Moreover, they would have to be so in the context of the human need of belonging [145], mutually shaping each other as identity is relational and developed in dialog [18,147].

4.2. Routes for Research

Avenues for research are to develop several specific strands and/or focus on open questions. For the first, suggestions are to differentiate between general, positive and critical workplace spirituality [61], specific religions, or existential, meaning-related questions [148]. This is in line with the fact that most studies employ a functionalistic angle, requiring work based on other paradigms [91]. All approaches can be combined with a

focus on outcomes [19], transactions and/or antecedents [97], employing different ethical theories [29,141]. Finally, there are open philosophical and practical questions outlined below that can be used for future theoretical and empirical research building on this conceptual piece.

4.2.1. Philosophical Questions

Which type of, whether and how workplace spirituality should be an ethically permissible instrument for the economic purposes of a firm needs to be discussed, just as if it truly is a win-win situation. Usually, there are standards for guaranteeing workplace safety for physical and partly also psychological dangers [109,149], which might have to include spirituality aspects to discuss which aspects of the workforce and of life should be allowed to be 'incorporated' into the organization [79]. Additionally, a debate is required, at least in organizations wanting to engage in workplace spirituality, about whether they are interested, in which types, and how spirituality can be expected from employees.

Closely connected to this is the question of who should be allowed to define meaning—a central element of several definitions—in the work context, for whom, and for what. This is based on the high importance of meaning not only in the definitions of spirituality [82], but also in its general importance [3] and impact on well-being [81,150,151] and productivity [152]. While it has been argued that organizations have an obligation to themselves and others to change from within to allow for more meaningful work [18], there is a difference in the type of meaning that work provides and the result that comes from it. Now, this is not always the case, implicitly making those who work to earn money less relevant for the concept of workplace spirituality. In addition, functionalizing meaning or any form of spirituality to result in higher productivity [79] certainly also has a meaning for the firm.

4.2.2. Practical Questions

Most challenging on the practical side are questions around task, acceptance and opportunities for management regarding spirituality at the workplace, as its benefits are linked to leadership creating favorable conditions by ensuring spiritual diversity [153]. There is some evidence that management can create a 'spiritual' climate (also see organizational culture), so empirical investigations regarding its implementation and promotion are needed, together with reflecting on the conditions required for this to be among the leaders' tasks (also see multi-dimensional concepts). Allowing the 'unfolding of each individual through his or her participation in the work of the organization' [154] would still require some form of direction to avoid arbitrariness. Focusing on the elements of the multi-dimensional definitions of workplace spirituality might be a possibility, but it also creates possibilities for power misuse [40]. Including more employee-driven options [9] might reduce this likelihood. Following recent research, the outcome of organizational spirituality depends on prevalent triggers [63]. Thus, a force field analysis [155] could be performed regarding the latter, including potential antecedents, or facilitators [117] and the change management principles employed. Moreover, there is already research in the organizational behavior literature on how to promote specific behaviors. However, spirituality seems to be more than the sum of its elements. In addition, due to its closeness to sensemaking, spirituality at the workplace includes the reciprocal dynamics of all organizational members [63] and socio-material aspects [24,146].

Second, including workplace spirituality tasks in management and leadership responsibilities might subsequently have to affect personnel selection and promotion, especially for management roles. In addition, (aspiring) managers would need to be taught about workplace spirituality in a fitting manner and by qualified personnel [53,71,153,156]. In this context again, the choice of definitions comes into play as the question opens up as to whether spirituality as such can be taught [157] and which aspects of it should be focused on. Moreover, role and task conflicts of managers may well increase [29], especially when observing multi-dimensional concepts, and they might need additional resources for buffering these.

Third, research is needed on how to avoid ethically problematic utilization and adverse effects. As mentioned above, workplace spirituality is sometimes referred to as helpful for employees in uncertain economic times [86]. However, exactly these likely lead to layoffs, when managers who formerly created a spiritual climate and promoted meaningful jobs would now be forced to take these away. On the one hand, they may themselves find this difficult [158] out of a sense of responsibility or virtue orientation they have to violate by making people redundant, requiring resources to deal with this fact. On the other hand, they knowingly create a loss for those affected. The survivor effect might extend to questioning the credibility and reliability of the spiritual climate and related psychological contracts [8].

Fourth, the spirituality vs. religion debate is continued, especially regarding banning the latter due to fear of conflicts on various levels [29,30] and paradoxes [32]. Depending on how spirituality is defined, a separation of spirituality and religion becomes less realistic (see Table 1, part on religion vs. spirituality), and fears regarding conflicting positions might have the chance to be alleviated [32]. In this context, the current diversity discourse rather argues for increasing diversity and outlines how leadership can actively manage it [159,160].

5. Conclusions

This article argues for a re-evaluation of the concept of spirituality at the workplace as it requires more theoretical [22], practical and ethical consideration than it has received so far. Discussing current definitions reveals that (a) their theoretical value may be limited as there are other well-established concepts covering identical aspects (see Section 4.1. and Table 1, related theoretical concepts and ideas). Moreover, the vast majority of all typically used definitions are secular, so the label ‘spiritual’ can be misleading due to its connotation with the term ‘sacred’. While ‘we hold many things precious in our lives (. . .), none of these should be confused with a search for the sacred unless it takes on lasting sacred attributes’ [28]—work and the organization as such included. In addition to further theoretical problems leading to paradoxes, including unclear definitions allowing for very diverse interpretations [40], (b) the practical implications of spirituality at the workplace may be completely undesired from an ethical stance, and (c) the practical application can be very difficult—in and of itself, due to (a) and (b). This text has highlighted several interconnections and overlaps in the definitions of theory and practice.

Additionally, companies so far are not responsible for taking care of spirituality. The argument why this should be incorporated now and not remain in the personal sphere as an individual obligation is missing and should be connected to defining the role we want organizations to play in modern society since ‘[h]ow we organize and manage follows from our belief in the way things ought to be’ [154].

There is a window of opportunity for HR after the pandemic to change workplaces [161], though attention has to be paid to not change for the worse [67]. In addition to defining their own purpose, organizations and their leaders need to clarify their conceptualization of the employee. On this basis, the elements of the psychological contract desired can be defined and cross-checked with the workforce, paving the way for deciding on the aspects of workplace spirituality needed. This allows for aligning and monitoring all subsequent actions and communications to ensure transparency and avoid violations or breaches of the psychological contract [1], which depends on which need-fulfillment duties are ascribed to organizations.

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