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THE PLACE OF SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK: PRACTITIONERS' PERSONAL VIEWS AND BELIEFS

Alexis Garcia-Irons

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THE PLACE OF SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK: PRACTITIONERS'

PERSONAL VIEWS AND BELIEFS

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

_____

by

Alexis Nicole Garcia-Irons

June 2018

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Approved by:

Dr. Thomas Davis, Faculty Supervisor, Social Work

Dr. Janet Chang, Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

The integration of spirituality in Social Work is on the rise, but due to the lack of literature on spiritually-involved interventions and applicable integration of spirituality into ones practice, literature suggests social workers do not feel competent or confident in this area of practice. This study explores the attitudes and beliefs of social workers in San Bernardino County towards spirituality in their own practice and social work overall. The data is collected through audio recording individual interviews with each participant, which are then transcribed into transcripts. The transcripts are coded for themes and commonalities among the participants. Results lay the foundation for further research and conversation regarding spirituality and how to further integrate or continue integrating it into social work practice in San Bernardino County.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

To my dad and

to the One who loves

without limits.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Social Work origins are founded in practices of spirituality. In the mid-1800s, establishments called Charitable Organizations were made up of church affiliated personnel and volunteers who were designated to help the poor, homeless and severely ill (Popple & Leighninger,1990). The idea behind these early social work efforts were founded on the the biblical idea of charity. However, over the years the field became much more secularized as professionalism became a major issue for the field of social work. For example, one major reason for social works professional push came from Abraham Flexner's publication "Is Social Work a Profession?" in which he criticized social work's legitimacy. Along with many factors such as the secularization of society, student and liberal movements of the 60s and 70s and the growth of government in the social work field, spirituality and religion also separated from the field itself (Popple & Leighninger,1990). Spirituality and religion has now become a topic that is talked little about in social work practice with clients and practitioners.

As a result of the secularization of the social work field, education on the topic is very minimal in social work programs across the U.S. as well as overseas (Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004). Studies of social workers in the U.S. especially show that the general belief is that there is intrinsic value in the

use of spirituality in social work, but little literature and education exists in social work programs, let alone in the field (Crisp, 2017).

This discrepancy between the desire for more common use of spirituality in social work practice in the field and the lack of formal training and education on the topic has many implications for the social work field. For example, social workers may be depriving clients from exploring a topic or source of strength and hope that may otherwise help them. For example, in patients with AIDS or those dealing with sexual self-esteem, religion/spirituality has been shown to be a major positive coping factor through therapy (Seinfeld, 2012). On the other hand, the client may have a very strong connection to their faith or spiritual practice and the social worker may not be sufficiently prepared to speak on the topic and realize how it fits in helping the client (Sheridan, et al., 2014). Further macro implications can be drawn from research, past and present, which illuminate the overall secularization of the field and how the National association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) illuminates this discrepancy further. For example, there is minimal mention of the field's spiritual beginnings or initiatives that currently address the use or education of spirituality and religion in practice on the CSWE website (About CSWE, 2017). Overall, this leaves out a large part of human experience from social work practice, causing it to be minimally discussed or ignored altogether. This can be detrimental to one's practice when working with someone who identifies as religious or spiritual. Research suggests that using conversations

that integrate religion/spirituality with ones chronic illness can help the client feel more supported and even shows an improvement in emotional state (Rafferty, et al., 2015). These findings illuminate a link between a client's recovery with the use of spirituality and religion in practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the thoughts and beliefs of social workers in regards to the integration of spirituality in social work practice. The integration of spirituality in social work has fluctuated over the profession's history, and is currently in a state where there is more awareness of and desire to use it in practice (Lezotte, 2010), but is also proving to be a complex and uncomfortable topic for social workers to integrate. Little research has been conducted in this county, despite the fact that it is the largest county in the U.S. This research study aimed to begin to fill the information gap regarding spirituality in social work practice.

This study aimed to gather information from licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) in San Bernardino County working in private practice in order to explore whether or not this is true of this county as well. Semi-structured interviews of 8 LCSWs were conducted, transcribed and thematically analyzed in order to gather meaningful data. Using semi-structured interviews was a better way to address this topic as opposed to surveys or other quantitative methods because it is such a complex and new topic. The full scope of experience,

thoughts and beliefs were captured in order to fully understand this topic and how it internally affects social workers in practice.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

This study was needed because, as mentioned above, San Bernardino County is the largest county in the U.S. and there are virtually no data investigating the integration of spirituality and social work. Much has been done in the way of studying cultural competency, which is where spirituality falls in the NASW code of ethics, but little in regards to spirituality. Spirituality is something that is integrated into well over half of U.S. citizens' lives and about 40% of constituents in San Bernardino County (San Bernardino County, California (CA) Religion Statistics Profile, 2010).

It was important to explore what education backgrounds the social workers have, what outside training (if any) they sought in this topic area and their general experiences with spirituality in their practice. The findings from this study illuminated the extent to which this gap in education and training regarding spirituality in practice effects social workers in San Bernardino County and the general consensus on how these social workers feel spirituality has or does not have a place in their own personal practice. This created an opportunity and a gateway to addressing discrepancies in practice regarding spirituality by way of identifying foundational, tangible elements of spirituality. The results can be taken further to create change that will ultimately allow social workers in San

Bernardino County to better serve their clients and become more effective practitioners.

The results of this study offer a stepping stone to major changes in the way social workers address and utilize their skills in work with clients. This study contributed specific social worker thoughts, beliefs and views on an area of practice that does not have very recent data or research for social workers to utilize today. The information in this study also provided a platform from which the overall conversation regarding the integration of spirituality and social work can take place in San Bernardino County. Lastly, this research gave an overall better understanding of what this topic looks like in practice in San Bernardino County. Exploring this topic through these interviews gave the field a better understanding of current social work practice and spirituality.

This research has an effect on many aspects of the social worker-client interaction, but most directly affects the conceptualization of the planning stage of the generalist model. The planning stage is pivotal in deciding how the rest of the interaction will go with a client and is how the social worker conceptualizes their work overall. Spirituality is an overarching belief system that clients operate their lives from, whether they believe in a higher power or not. If this aspect is left out of the planning stage, a part of the client is essentially missing as well. However, if this is properly integrated and guided by the client, the process and work with the client will become more effective and meaningful. The research question this research answered was: How do licensed social work practitioners

in San Bernardino County perceive spirituality in their personal practice and in

the field of social work overall?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will cover the current literature regarding spirituality and social work. Research that analyzes social workers' use of spirituality in practice, the field's professional education/training surrounding this topic as well as social workers' overall beliefs regarding the integration of social work and spirituality is scarce or out of date. However, this chapter will discuss the limited research that is available regarding the use of spirituality in social work practice. Furthermore, the implications of the gaps in literature for social work practice will be discussed ending with the theories guiding this study overall.

Literature and Education

The literature on social work history and spirituality illuminates three main themes: spirituality and religion are at the foundations of the profession itself, professionals are ambivalent about the topic and spirituality is beneficial when used with clients. One article on social work history speaks fluently to these three themes. In Davis's (2017) article, he discusses social work saints such as Louise de Marillac and Ellen Gates Starr and how their legacies are either absent or modified in social work literature. These figures are foundational to how the profession began and was sustained in the early years, and their absence form mainstream literature has created a sense of "anxiety among social work

scholars" (Davis, 2017). The effects and implications of this are validated

throughout other social work literature as well and will be discussed in this

chapter (Furman et al., 2004; Lee & Barrett 2007; Canda & Furman 2010; Dudley

2013; Sheridan et al, 2013; Sheridan & Amato von-Hemert 2014)

<u>Spirituality and Religion as Social Work's Foundation</u>

      Canda and Furman (2010) studied the opinions of social work

practitioners regarding the use of spirituality in their own practice. They found

that these practitioners felt they lacked training and education regarding

spirituality integration in practice. This may be explained by the lack of

theory/framework of spirituality in social work, leaving social workers to rely on

their own discretion on how to tackle this topic with clients (Carrignton, 2013).

The findings of Canda & Furman (2010) echo an ever-growing need for more

education and professional training regarding how to integrate spirituality into

social work practice (Belcher & Mellinger 2016; Bullis, 1996; Moss, 2003;

Carrington, 2013 Council on Social Work Education, 2001; Eun-Kyoung, &

Barrett, 2007; Stevenson, Eck, & Hill 2007). Social work had its beginnings in a

spiritually-based mentality and environment and utilized that mentality to guide

practice (Popple & Leighninger, 1990). However, over time, the field of social

work became more professional and secularized, thus religion and spirituality

was slowly discarded in practice as well (Seinfeld, 2012). The use of spirituality

and religion was no longer seen as acceptable by the growing scientific and

evidence-based ways of thinking that emerged in the early 1900s (Seinfeld,

2012). As a result, the way spirituality and religion were then taught and thought about changed. Instead of being more of a focal point in practice, these subjects became a hindrance to the now-professional nature of social work. This has had many implications on social work as a profession, individual social workers and the way in which social work is carried out as well.

Professional Ambivalence Towards Spirituality

An overwhelming amount of literature has identified that a majority of social workers feel that they do not have the appropriate training to utilize spirituality in their practice or express ambivalence/anxiety around spirituality (Bullis, 1996; Moss, 2003; Eun-Kyoung, & Barrett, 2007; Stevenson, Eck, & Hill 2007; Carrington, 2013; Davis, T. 2017; Belcher & Mellinger 2016; Oxhandler & Parrish 2018). Social workers make up the majority of clinical practitioners that are trained in mental health, making up about 45 percent of the field (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). Despite this, social workers identify lack of education and training (Barker 2007), and lack of models regarding the integration of spirituality and practice (Carrington 2013), as issues that lead to an overall reliance on personal instincts on how to incorporate spirituality in practice (Sheridan 2009; Sheridan 2014).

These ambivalent feelings regarding the integration of spirituality and/or religion in social work is evident all over the globe. Carlisle (2016) recognized the growing emphasis on religion and spirituality in the UK and thus, studied responses to it in Northern Ireland. The findings overall illuminated very unsure

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feelings among practitioners. The respondents recognized spirituality and religion on a cultural level, but were not sure if and/or how to use it in their practice. The practitioners struggled with where to draw the line between personal and professional boundaries. The study suggests the social work profession takes a different approach to spirituality and religion in order to create more opportunities and safe places for this ambivalence to be discussed and processed in order to better prepare their social workers.

Another unique, comparative international study was done that compared Aotearoa New Zealand (AZN) and the UK in terms of integrating spirituality and religion in social work practice (Stirling et al., 2010) They found that both countries had a low utilization of spirituality and religion in practice, but AZN with a slightly higher rate than the UK due to the large population of Maotori indigenous people in the region. The AZN government recognized this large population and integrated an awareness of some of their cultural and spiritual beliefs into social work practice. The UK displayed similar policy in regards to other specific minority groups of their country such as the Islamic population. Although there were some efforts to integrate spirituality of different groups into social work practice, it was minimal and selective. The study concluded by acknowledging the global growing emphasis on the integration of religion and spirituality challenging social work professions worldwide to better incorporate it in their work.

Lastly, Dwyer (2010) is one of many studies that examined attitudes of social workers in the U.S. towards this integration. The study highlighted respondent's ambivalence also towards personal and professional boundaries. Respondents recognized their implicit biases in practice towards their own personal beliefs, but had no formal way of addressing or processing these beliefs. The study pushes education as a counterbalance to offset and guide these beliefs so that practitioners can better utilize spirituality and religion with clients.

The ambivalence towards this topic is widespread, not just contained in U.S. social work programs and professions. As a result, a great global need is illuminated that social workers not only recognize, but are asking for guidance on. There have been small attempts to create models of integration (Canda, 2010; Carrington 2013), but there has been no widespread acceptance of a framework for the profession as a whole.

Spirituality Benefits

Belcher & Mellinger (2016) argue that spirituality allows clients to use it as a lens to make sense of the greater picture and to reflect on how they are connected to their community. It is a tool that people already put in place in their lives and is something that can be very helpful. Furthermore, Stevenson and colleagues (2007) argue that even in psychology it is ethically, culturally and clinically appropriate and relevant to use spirituality for clients in direct practice work.

Spirituality in social work scholar research has also noted the benefits spirituality has in regards to mental health and suicidality among many different populations (Davidson, 2003; Repper &Perkins, 2003) including those with disabilities (Higashida, M., 2016), LGBT (Stroud 2015), military personnel (Bryan et al 2015) and even those suffering from mental illnesses such as schizophrenia can experience spiritualty's benefits (Davidson, 2003). Bryan et al. (2015) discusses some reasons that spirituality acts as a protective factor against suicidality and depression is because of the existential elements to it such as meaning of life discussions, forgiveness and belief in something greater than oneself. Another interesting study, through thematic analysis of online cemetery memorials, found significance of spirituality also through the grief process in those that had lost family members (Krysinska 2014).

Current Perspectives of the Use of Spirituality in Practice

One reason that has been identified by the literature that spirituality is not used in practice is because it is a subjective topic and it may lose its meaning to the client in trying to define it, thus losing its effectiveness in practice (Belcher & Mellinger, 2016). Although similar in nature, spirituality and religion are defined differently in literature and by clients as well. A generally accepted definition of spirituality is a feeling of connection to something outside of or bigger than oneself, that gives meaning and purpose to life and the happenings in life (Canda & Furman, 2010). In contrast, religion is typically defined as the practices and rituals people participate in to express that sense of spirituality (Canda &

Furman, 2010). These definitions speak to how the topics are interrelated, but not the same. The way a social worker is called to understand these topics in practice, then, is by the experiences and descriptions given by the client(s). A client may identify as just spiritual, just religious, both, or neither, but it all comes back to the client's personal view.

There have also been some arguments that the use of religion and/or spirituality in practice will make practice too rigid and dogmatic, thus hindering instead of helping clients (Sheridan 2009). However, this research was cited dating back to the early 90s, and since then there has been a bigger surge of literature explaining the benefits of integrating spirituality into practice with clients (Stevenson, et al., 2007). Stevenson et al (2007) also mentions how there has been an increase in the literature regarding the integration of spirituality and care, but also how it has not been fully accepted into clinical work such as counseling and therapy. These authors stress the importance and need for the integration to become more complete.

Furthermore, comparative study done in Texas among clinical social workers, registered nurses, licensed MFTs, psychologists and professional counselors was done to identify any discrepancies among the professions in regards to integration of spirituality in practice and feelings of self-efficacy in doing so. This study found that social workers had positive views towards spirituality interventions in practice, but had a low percentage of implementation. Additionally, only 13% of social workers had had a previous class on spirituality

through formal education and 46% sought continuing education on the topic. Furthermore, the study found that those who had higher identification with intrinsic religiosity were more likely to use spirituality in practice (Oxhandler & Parrish 2018). This study gives insight into how social workers themselves view their own personal efficacy and use of spirituality in practice.

Overall, literature has discussed some benefits and possible challenges when integrating social work practice and spirituality. Despite the in depth discussions, actual numbers and statistics on this topic are scarce and therefore there is no specific, generalizable finding besides the fact that this gap in education and practice exists. The literature available suggests that there is a need expressed by social workers in the field and that there is a lack of education and training on this topic. Subsequently, social workers feel they are not fully prepared and able to discuss this topic with clients let alone integrate it into their practice (Carrington, 2013). This could be attributed to the push of social work towards being more professionalized, the gradual change in attitude towards spirituality and religion in the U.S. in general, or the simple lack of awareness in the gap itself.

Implications

Regardless of the reason why there is a scarcity in relevant and recent literature addressing this issue, the fact remains that the literature that does exist shows that social work practitioners feel that they are unprepared to effectively use spirituality in social work practice when appropriate (Bullis, 1996; Moss,

2003; Eun-Kyoung, & Barrett, 2007; Stevenson, Eck, & Hill 2007; Carrington, 2013; Davis, T. 2017; Belcher & Mellinger 2016; Oxhandler & Parrish 2018). Interestingly, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) states that "social work educational programs must include spiritual and religious issues in their framework for understanding diversity and human behavior" (CSWE, 2001). This organization is responsible for accrediting schools of social work in the U.S. and clearly addresses the issue of spirituality in social work through their standards. However, Eun-Kyoung, & Barrett (2007) point out that although this issue is a topic that is to be covered in education and training, the CSWE and NASW do not incorporate in curriculum how to ethically use spirituality in practice. This means that social workers are made aware of the interplay of spirituality and social work practice, but are not necessarily told how to use it in their practice. This then points out a pivotal reason as to why social workers struggle to use it in practice (Carrington, 2013).

Although religion and spirituality are recognized as individual experiences, this does not negate the need for there to be a general framework or model from which social work can operate from. Canda (2010) defines spirituality generally as a part of humanness that involves ones connection to something greater, and the way in which the individual does this is what makes their religion. As many researchers have realized, spirituality and religion are becoming topics that are more and more emphasized and needed in practice with clients (Dwyer 2010; Stirling et al., 2010; Carlisle 2016). As a result, social work has an obligation to

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clients to lead, train and prepare its workers to utilize these aspects of humanness in sessions with clients. If not, then social workers cannot truly adhere to the ethics of competency, dignity and worth of the person or integrity (Workers, N.A. 2008).

These studies illuminate the growing realization that spirituality and religion in practice are vital to being a competent and prepared social worker. Studies have looked at this issue from the lenses of liberation theology (Eun-Kyoung, & Barrett 2007); a positivist approach (Carrington, 2013); Integrated Spiritual Framework Practice (Carrington, 2013), etc.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

For the purposes of the current study, the issue will be looked at using the strengths perspective. This perspective is a pivotal tool used in social work since the 1980s when it was first introduced to work with patients in mental health settings (Song & Shih, 2010). This approach to practice calls social workers to help clients by helping them identify the strengths that are present in all aspects of their lives from the micro to macro levels (Drolet, et al., 2007). One of the main benefits of using this perspective is it helps to empower clients. It gives them the confidence that they have control over what happens in their lives and that they can create changes when they need to (Drolet, Paquin, & Soutyrine, 2007).

This perspective is appropriate for two main reasons. First, the literature suggests that the absence of education regarding the use of spirituality in social work practice is hindering the work of social workers (Eun-Kyoung, & Barrett

2007). Using spirituality in social work has been identified as something that helps clients make sense of their situation and the world around them (Belcher & Mellinger, 2016) , therefore allowing them to feel like they have better control in what happens to them. Without utilizing this tool to its maximum potential with clients, social workers are missing a major piece in effective practice.

Second, the literature also suggests that clients, who identify as spiritual or religious, greatly benefit from this conversation. This is more or less because of the spiritual/religious aspect and more about the fact that the social worker helps the client utilize something they already have in their lives that they trust. Trying to work with a client while avoiding the topic of spirituality and religion because their social worker feels unprepared to address it, can hinder the empowerment the client needs.

Summary

The social work field is currently experiencing an increase in need for materials and best practices regarding the integration of spirituality into practice, but is contrastly finding that there is little research currently providing this information. Spirituality is recognized as an important part of client's lives and therefore important for social work practice. The lack of training, education and preparation to address this aspect of client's lives is leaving social workers feeling unsatisfied and ultimately uncomfortable in their work. This study looks to explore this issue through the strengths perspective to ultimately illuminate

specific areas in which social workers may feel better equipped when working

with clients who are spiritual and/or religious.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study aims to identify social worker thoughts and beliefs regarding the integration of spirituality in social work. This chapter will discuss how this study will identify and describe these personal thoughts and beliefs. The sections discussed will be study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore licensed clinical social workers' (LCSWs) and Masters of Social Work (MSWs) views on the place of spirituality in social work practice. There is very limited current research literature on this topic overall and virtually nonexistent for San Bernardino County. Due to the lack of research in this area, an exploratory study was carried out. There are few viewpoints presented in the overall literature regarding the integration of spirituality and social work, however these may differ when it comes to San Bernardino County. Therefore, in order to allow participants' unique personal views to be recorded and discussed, qualitative interviews were conducted. The interviews were comprised of open-ended questions with a few demographic questions recorded for sampling purposes.

One strength of this method is that the unique and personal viewpoints of social workers were captured. This is best done through qualitative methods because participants have the opportunity to use their own words, phrasing and creativity in answering the questions instead of being forced to choose to describe their experience through someone else's words. The qualitative nature of the study allowed for more in-depth information to be gathered that gave new perspectives on the topic.

One limitation of this method is that qualitative interviews take time and require the participant to have a level of trust with the interviewer in regards to this topic. Historically, spirituality in social work has swung on a pendulum, meaning, the field's perception on using spirituality in practice has moved between extremes of integration and secularization. Consequently, the field is now experiencing a swing back from complete secularization to now coming into a more integration-minded view in practice. Some interviewees may feel uncomfortable or unwilling to answer questions fully due to their mindset in regards to these shifts of practice.

This study, again, sought to answer the question: How do social work practitioners in San Bernardino County perceive the role of religion and spirituality in their personal practice and in the field of social work overall?

Sampling

The sample for this study utilized a non-random purposive and snowball sample of 8 social workers from various agencies. A general mass email was

sent to about 20 LCSWs (see appendix A) of different agencies and they were encouraged to inform the researcher of any other LCSWs/MSWs that met the study's criteria to be a participant. There are four criteria each social worker must have met in order to be selected for the study: the social worker must have been licensed (LCSW), had five years or more of experienced as an LCSW/MSW, had familiarity with social work and spirituality and some familiarity with working with clients who bring up spirituality in practice. This sample was ideal for the study because the purpose was to explore social workers' beliefs and experiences regarding spirituality in practice. In order to have expressed experience that are meaningful and useful for this study, some experience with the topic must be a requirement. Also, drawing from multiple different backgrounds of social workers gave a better understanding of the social work field as a whole instead of sectioning off one sector.

<div align="center">Data Collection and Instruments</div>

This study collected data using qualitative methods via individual interviews beginning in March and ending in April 2018. These interviews were audio recorded live on a recorder that uses a USB drive for audio storage. The researcher asked the interviewee some demographic questions that include age, years of experience, practice interests, achieved years of education, etc. (see full interview guide in Appendix B).

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide that has been created specifically for this study. The interview guide used (see Appendix B)

was created by the researcher with the help of Dr. Thomas Davis. This guide

aimed to elicit in depth responses from participants in the study. The guide allows

participants to share their own experience with spirituality and social work and

how they view this integration. The topics included in the guide are the

integration of spirituality and social work, feelings of preparedness in practice

with client in regards to this topic and beliefs regarding the quality of outcomes

when using spirituality in practice. Some strengths of this tool are in the open-

ended questions. This will allow the researcher to gain insight into each

LCSWs/MSWs unique experience. The interviewee's responses were not limited

by pre-established answers, but rather allowed participants to give new and

insightful answers.

Some limitations of this instrument were the interviewee's level of comfort

with it. The questions asked in-depth questions about an aspect of practice that

may be uncomfortable, so they may not have been as open and forthcoming with

their personal information. Also, some interviewees may have felt intimidated or

uncomfortable in answering these questions face to face.

Procedures

A mass email was sent out to approximately 20 social workers

(LCSWs/MSWs) from varying agencies with the purpose of the study, procedures

and criteria to participate in the study. Social workers responded and the day and

times of interviews were given. In order to gather as much data as possible, the

LCSWs/MSWs were prompted to inform researcher of any other LCSWs/MSWs

who met the criteria who would like to participate as well. The email was then sent to that social worker as well.

Data collection took place in a neutral, non-agency affiliated location (CSUSB or a meeting place of the interviewees choosing). Researcher Alexis Garcia-Irons conducted the interviews individually with each participant. Individual interviews were chosen instead of group interviews in order to avoid group think and in order to allow time for each LCSW to explain their unique view on the research topic. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes each.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study asked basic demographic information and did not ask participants to sign their name on any document. After being read the informed consent, participants acknowledged their understanding of informed consent by putting an 'X' on the line, so as to further ensure anonymity (see appendix C). Names were used in the introduction of the interview session, before the recording of the session began. Once the audio recording began the participants' names were not used or recorded for any purpose.

After the interview was concluded and the audio recording stopped, the interviewer read the interviewee the debriefing statement (see appendix D) that outlined what happens with the information they had just given. All audio recordings are be stored on an encrypted USB drive in a locked desk. A transcribing service, Landmark Associates, was used to transcribe the audio from the interviews into hard copy transcripts. Names of participants were not given to

this service. One year after the completion of this study, all information will be deleted and destroyed.

Data Analysis

Within 24 hours the audio was transcribed into paper transcripts of the interviews. Once the transcripts were received, they were coded and given definitive thematic structure. The type of constructs expected to emerge are spirituality, spirituality centered social work practice and the role of spirituality in social work education. Other variables that were coded were practice wisdom from work with clients, narrative accounts from licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs), age, years of practice, practice interests, achieved years of education, licensure and area of expertise.

Summary

This study aimed to identify and illuminate social worker views on the integration of spirituality and social work as whole as well as in their own personal practice. This was done using an interview guide that collected demographic information and also included a majority of open-ended questions. These questions were designed to assist participants in sharing their own experience with the topic and share their views on the pros and cons of the integration of social work and spirituality. Qualitative methods were employed In order to gather information for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Through interviewing many professionals on their view of spirituality,
themes and interesting findings emerged. Due to the fact that spirituality is an
abstract concept that is sometimes difficult to define, as research has mentioned,
this study aimed to concretize the idea of spirituality by identifying the people,
places, artifacts and ideas that were discussed and mentioned throughout all
interviews. These categories will be referred hereon after as elements of
spirituality. The demographic information of interviewees is first presented,
followed by the elements of spirituality.

Analyses

Table 1 shows the demographic information of each participant.
Participants were 30 years old and above, most around age 60. Participants all
had multiple years of experience in clinical practice; a few had over 20 years of
experience in clinical social work. Practice interests ranged from private practice
to high risk youth to forensic social work, illuminating the vast interests among
each participant. Despite the participants noting that they have worked with and
are knowledgeable about spirituality in social work practice, all come from
secular based organizations and agencies.

Tables 2-7 have the elements of spirituality organized by people, places, artifacts and ideas with "People" and "Artifacts" broken down further to include subcategories for better interpretation. These elements were identified through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The element categories were decided before analysis began, and from there the elements were organized and consolidated into the tables. Some data contains quotations around the elements in order to capture the true and genuine words of those interviewed so as to diminish researcher bias and/or misinterpretation of data.

Data Thematic Results

The research question being addressed in this study was: How do licensed social work practitioners in San Bernardino County perceive spirituality in their personal practice and in the field of social work overall? This was aimed to be an exploratory question in order to illuminate whether social workers perceptions of spirituality in social work in San Bernardino complemented or refuted those found in literature on the same topic as well as social workers general views of spirituality in practice overall. From the data gathered three main themes emerged: spirituality is undeniably part of humanity and human experience, spirituality happens and can happen anywhere and clinicians see it as an inextricable element in social work practice, regardless of setting or personal belief.

Table 1. Demographics of Research Participants

DEMOGRAPHIC	Participant Response
Age:	64, 64, 47, 34, 47, 64, 46, 65 (34, 46,47, 64, 65)
Licensure (Title(s)):	MSW, LCSW, LCSW, LCSW, LCSW, MSW, LCSW, Ph. D
Years of Clinical Experience:	37, 20, 12, 6, 16+, 33, 22, 10
Years of Secondary Formal Education:	2, 10, 4, 2, 3, 16, 2, 10
Practice Interests:	Child welfare, high risk youth/families, severely/persistently mentally ill and LGBT, trauma, dialysis and couples, High risk youth/substance abuse/social justice, forensic social work and individual/group therapy, macro social work

Table 2. Research Category: People-General

Content/Theme

- Clients/Patients
- Clinician/Therapist/ "older practitioners"
- "human being and social worker"
- "people who are religious"
- Creator
- Spiritual person/spiritual being
- Family ("son")/ family members
- Students, professor, doctors, residents, interns

Table 3. Research Category: People-Specific

Content/Theme
• God
• "Wiccans, Catholics, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, humanists, Satanist."
• Existentialist
• "Methodist ministers, Mennonites, ex-Catholics, Jews, Unitarians."
• St. Augustine
• Allah
• "Atheist student, anarchist student, Muslim students, Catholic students"
• "Muslim woman"

Table 4. Research Category: Places

Content/Theme

- "government of government-funded social services"/ "public sector"/ "governmental setting"/ "secular entity"

- Private practice

- Loma Linda University/ Loma Linda Hospital/ Seventh Day Adventist Hospital/ UC Medical Center/ hospice

- CPS/ "child welfare services"

- "The County" (in reference to SB county)

- Cultural competence committees

- "Center in Riverside" (referencing child and family services)

- School/grad school/ university/ MSW program/ post graduate school/trainings/ workshops/ educational trainings

- "Your neighborhood, your community"/ "our environment" (nature)

- Churches/ "Buddhist celebration"/ "Kwanza celebration"/ Muslim Mosque

Table 5. Research Category: Artifacts- Abstract

Content/Theme

- Concept of heaven/ moral compass/personal journey/belief/faith/ "staunch or rigid dogmas"/belief system/religion/ "evil demons"/ "life, death, love"

- Bio-, psycho-, social- assessment

- Faith-based therapy

- "strengths, gifts, capabilities"

- Worship/music/gospel/meditation/prayer/ "Mass on Sunday"/ritual

- Spirituality as a "tool"/"tool box"/"basket of things"

- Self-care

- Therapy resources

- "…doing some Yoga and meditation…walks in the woods...finding a calm place…"

- Guided imagery

- Language

- Special Events [held at spiritual/religious places]

Table 6. Research Category: Artifacts- Concrete

Content
• Government money
• Literature/ books or articles/ "books on spirituality"/"books on Muslim religion"/textbooks
• Burka/ "traditional Muslim dress"
• Bulletin boards
• Drinks, refreshments, food
• Bible
• Candles

Table 7. Research Category: Ideas

Content/Theme

(Personal Communication, Participant 1, April 2018):

- "Social work has an obligation to talk about anything that's important to clients."

(Personal Communication, Participant 3, April 2018):

- "Spirituality allows you to see the purpose in it, the meaning in it, or the chance in it, the opportunity in it, whereas sometimes people are not willing to see a painful situation that way."

- "I think using spirituality in social work is amazing because you can see somebody—it's like you can help somebody get a –somebody a perspective shift in—about their problem or whatever. Spirituality is like that times a hundred million thousand or something because it is so powerful."

- "I think, if you're a social worker who says, 'I'm gonna do everything, but I'm not gonna ever talk about God or spiritual matters because I'm not into that, then you're not really a social worker."

- "For some reason, human beings like to have purpose, and we wanna know that what we do and say matters, and that there's meaning to our lives."

(Personal Communication, Participant 5, April 2018)

- "I think that it's influential for not just them but also for the social workers that work with them...It also, I think, makes us as therapists or people that intervene in their lives feel even better about that interaction."

(Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2018)

- "If we aren't addressing it we are avoiding it."

- "But I think as a general rule across the board, I think social work is gonna have to come to grips with this a bit more."

- "…if you're gonna be competent and capable and really believe in the strength-based approach, you really have to figure out how you're going to deal with your stuff to be able to get to that point where you can be open-minded and fulfill my obligation as a practitioner to the people I work with."

(Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2018)

- "Spirituality, to me, is one's own personal journey and of what's important to them, and what drives them and motivates them to be who they are, what they do drives their purpose in life, and that may be attached to religion, it may not be."

- "It is that core to our [social workers] sense of identity, and if we did

Content/Theme
not discuss spirituality, if we did not address spirituality or the absence of it, we wouldn't be half as effective in our jobs."

(Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2018):

- "I feel very uncomfortable if someone doesn't mention the meaning of being alive. I wonder that they're not thinking deep enough."

- "Spirituality and religion plays an important role in social work because it provides intelligibility to what we experience and to what we see and it provides clients with a framework to understand why they should be alive and do well."

Summary

Spirituality was broken down into elements of spirituality which includes people, places, artifacts and ideas. These elements were gathered through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and organized into tables separating out different elements of spirituality. Themes and clinician perceptions were gathered from the data that accomplished the task of the original research question as well as giving insight into how San Bernardino social workers view spirituality in social work practice. Further explanation and in depth analysis of the spirituality elements will be produced in the next section.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This section will discuss seven of the elements of spirituality in depth and what meaning they have for social workers in practice. This section then attempts to use the proposed meaning of each element as a guide on how to view the different elements in order to apply them to one's practice. The elements being discussed pull from each of the tables presented and include: Public sector, client/patient, school/grad school/university, books/literature, "If we aren't addressing it we are avoiding it" (Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2018)., "Spirituality allows you to see the purpose in it, the meaning in it, or the chance in it, the opportunity in it, whereas sometimes people aren't willing to see a painful situation that way" (Personal Communication, Participant 3, April 2018), worship/music/gospel/meditation/prayer. Further, recommendations on how to apply these findings to social work policy and future research will also be discussed.

Discussion

Public Sector

The "public sector" is an element that comes from the element category of 'places'. This element is in the abstract part of that category because it is not a specific agency or organization that one can go to, but rather, is representative of

a place where other specific agencies and organizations operate. What the public sector means or represents for social workers is opportunity. The public sector is an opportunity because it is a place that is represented as and connotated as a generally spiritual-less entity due to the general idea of separation of church and state. What this suggests is that social workers have the unique position in which to seize this opportunity to improve their quality of practice and service in the public sector. As mentioned previously, social work history has its roots in spirituality and religion (Popple & Leighninger, 2011) and has become a profession that works holistically with people. As so many of the interviewees alluded to, spirituality is a dimension of our humanity that is undeniable. This implies that social workers cannot properly improve the human condition without addressing spirituality. Therefore, the opportunity the public sector provides is obvious.

The opportunity the public sector provides can also start to solve the disconnect between social work practice and spirituality overall. Because spirituality is part of humanity, a foundational part of existing, it is something that cannot be contained to only faith-based agencies. This implies that the role of a social worker goes beyond the agency in which the social worker is working in in regards to spirituality. The opportunity to use spirituality calls a social worker to utilize the person-centered and holistic perspectives of a client in order to be effective. As one interviewee put it "If we aren't addressing it, we are avoiding it" (Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2018)

<u>"If we aren't addressing it we are avoiding it."</u>

This element of spirituality is in the categories of ideas, and was one that was a common idea among interviewees. Other interviewees discussed this in terms of concern if spirituality was not mentioned and on the other hand, more relived if a client did mention spirituality while in session. Ultimately, it all alludes to the greater meaning that spirituality is something that cannot and should not be overlooked or avoided when working with clients if social workers want to provide the best quality of care.

What this provides is a foundational lens through which social workers can look through regarding spirituality in social work practice. Literature has shown that social work is not an element of practice that is given much prescriptive attention, primarily just descriptive detail. As a result, it becomes this topic that is foreign, unknown and even taboo in practice. However, if clinicians take this idea of spirituality being part of the client as a whole, and not something 'extra' or 'secondary', the clinician can then begin to deconstruct the taboo nature of spirituality. This quoted idea provides a tool in which other social workers can look to and begin to embody in their own work.

The meaning of this idea points to the essential presence of spirituality when working with clients in social work practice. This indicates that spirituality is a much more important element than what it is currently viewed as in the eyes of the educational and professional community. All interviewees alluded to the idea that their experience with spirituality came from working in the field, not from

formal education. This can therefore also suggest an opportunity to be seized by the NASW and CSWE to assist social work practitioners in a more prescriptive way on how to handle spirituality in practice.

<u>Client/Patient</u>

One almost obvious element that was discussed was the client/patient themselves. This artifact is in the 'general people' category and is an element that all interviewees discussed in a majority of their responses. It would be easy to overlook this element due to the commonality of its use, however, the commonality and frequency of its use was worth looking into. The meaning of this element comes from the view that the client/patient is truly the access point to this human dimension of spirituality.

What this then implies is, first, that there is access to this abstract concept and it comes in the form of the very people social workers interact with almost daily. This indicates that there is, virtually, no limit to where spirituality can be encountered if one is in contact with client(s)/patient(s). A social work practitioner has the unique ability to encounter and engage with this foundational human dimension at any time.

Secondly, the meaning of this element then points to the need for social workers to be able to know how to actually engage and use this access point appropriately and effectively for the client while also empowering the client to understand it in themselves. If social work practitioners are the ones who encounter this access point, but are ill-equipped to do so, what true quality of

service is truly being provided? Or, how long does it take the social worker to realize the importance of this access point and in turn, seek out the means to increase their knowledge and application in practice?

Furthermore, this illuminates the need for spirituality to be addressed more thoroughly in formal education settings. Social workers in San Bernardino all used the language of this access point, and additionally stated they had to figure out how to utilize it on their own. This speaks to the possibility of growth that is presented in this area of practice. The need has been identified, and social workers have the access point in which to learn from.

School/Grad School/University

It then follows to discuss the role and meaning of the very places where social work practitioners are trained and made: in universities. This element comes from the category of 'places' and is crucial in the discussion of spirituality and social work. This element is important because it is, simply, the place where spirituality is legitimized. Once a topic makes it from a single author, to a journal, to small practice and then to a university, it has been legitimized from the ground up. Therefore, the university provides the means through which spirituality can legitimately be discussed and disseminated into the field.

What this provides is a starting point and a place to look to that will continue the increase of spirituality awareness for all upcoming, and even current, social workers. All interviewees went through a program at a university and were then legitimized as social workers and furthered their careers by

becoming licensed, which they could not have done without their schooling. The university is an essential stepping stone to becoming a social work practitioner. This implies that the logical place to facilitate the discussion of spirituality is through the university.

<u>Books/Literature</u>

Looking further into how the discussion of spirituality can be facilitated in universities, the element of books/literature emerge. A majority of interviewees mentioned books and literature as an unquestionable aspect of their growth as a social worker. What this element means for social workers is that the means to how to understand spirituality is available. Books/literature are the core of formal education and is the main medium through which knowledge is dispersed, discussed and debated.

This provides the "how" aspect for universities and other education organizations in regards to increasing spirituality application in practice. Some literature is out there in books and articles, but it is either not enough or not being utilized enough by the legitimizing element of the universities.

This indicates a stepping stone to be looked at when it comes to tackling the subject of spirituality.

"Spirituality allows you to see the purpose in it, the meaning in it, or the chance in it, the opportunity in it, whereas sometimes people aren't willing to see a painful situation that way."

This idea is an element of spirituality that speaks more specifically to why spirituality is important to clients and humans in general. This element means spirituality is a hope, a life framework, a guide, etc. to those who use it. The speaker is talking about how there is a change in perspective when spirituality is used when going through a hard situation. Spirituality simply makes the situation more hopeful, there is a purpose that is uncovered or made sense of, and this brings clarity or at least understanding to what a client is going through.

What this provides for social workers is a reason behind why spirituality is even important to incorporate in practice. Literature, research and other interviewees have already identified the benefits of this hope in clients who are depressed or suicidal. Spirituality or religion is used to intervene in a negative situation or with a negative thought pattern, to give a better perspective on it. What this partially solves is the mystery and taboo nature of spirituality. This element provides experiential legitimization of spirituality and therefore demystifies part of why it is so important to clients. Each client's interpretation and use of spirituality may be different, but the effect is the same.

Furthermore, this implies a sort of process and complexity to the use of spirituality in practice. The quote from the speaker mentions four aspects that spirituality helps to better illuminate or explain for a client, but those things need

to be discussed in context with the client. This element provides some avenues to explore when attempting to incorporate spirituality in practice.

Worship/Music/Gospel/Meditation/Prayer

Lastly, this element is from the 'abstract artifact' category and provides some practical components used within spirituality. The element of worship/gospel/meditation/prayer has use and meaning for social workers because it breaks down some of the specific tools and coping skills that spirituality presents. These elements were shared to interviewees by clients/patients as objects of their spirituality or ways to positively engage with spirituality. This also validates the idea the clients/patients give social workers access to spirituality's nature.

These elements provide a great resource to clinicians. Spirituality is an abstract dimension that is very unique to each individual, but these elements came up frequently in many interviews. There is something about these tools that allow clients to connect with their spirituality and access it for themselves. What this suggests is that there are tools for the social work practitioner's to utilize with clients when working spirituality into a treatment plan, discussing end-of-life topics, etc.

What this element also indicates is that there is some way for spirituality to be measured in practice. For example, a clinician may have the client/patient engage in listening to music or utilizing prayer to deal with anxiety or depression and the clinician is able to track the progress and usefulness of this coping skill.

This means the spirituality can, in a way, become a tangible and more observable part of one's practice. Once it is broken down into parts and understood, then it can be appropriately applied. This begins to solve and give language to the issue of complexity when it comes to spirituality.

Recommendations for Social Work Research, Policy and Practice

Research

The elements discussed attempted to identify ways in which spirituality could be understood and applied to social work practice. However, in order to truly make changes and to increase application of spirituality, further research must be done. One recommendation is to expand this study to incorporate more social workers, in order to further validate or identify additional elements of spirituality that social workers and clients experience. This would shed light on the depth and breadth of the disconnect between spirituality in formal education and how that translates into social work practice in the field and in agencies. The current study illuminated that this phenomenon is not exclusive to 'other' social workers, but social workers in San Bernardino County as well.

Continuing this same thought, research that would better help the social work field understand this topic better, would be to identify trends in social work education. As discussed in the literature review, social work has operated on a pendulum that has swung between embracing and overlooking spirituality. However, there is more than just literature out there that can speak to these trends. Social workers with many years of experience are a great resource to

utilize in order to discuss the nuances of these pendulum swings. Some interviewees from this study have 20+ years of experience both in the field and in teaching and can speak to the ebb and flow of different education trends. In gathering more information from individuals like these, the social work field can identify, generally, what helped the field in terms of quality education on spirituality and what acted as a challenge or limitation in that particular area of study. This would be a beneficial area of exploratory study that could help the social work field start to take legitimate steps towards implementing evidenced-based practices into education.

Policy

One recommendation for policy would be for the NASW and CSWE to include more education in master's programs on spirituality in social work practice. The history of social work is not hidden from students and it is clearly shown that the field grew out of spiritual and religious sentiments of helping, advocating and empowering those who could not yet do it on their own. The fact that this truth is minimized, thus allowing for spirituality to be virtually removed as a foundational piece of practice and social worker identity, is not beneficial to social work as a whole. As one interviewee put it: "It is that core to [social workers'] sense of identity, and if we did not discuss spirituality, if we did not address spirituality or the absence of it, we wouldn't be half as effective in our jobs" (Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2018).

Social Work Practice and Conclusions

It then follows from the results and discussion of this research, that spirituality should not be avoided in social work practice, but utilized and embraced for every client. The benefits, uses and importance of spirituality are clear and should therefore be utilized in order to truly be social workers. The field has been shifting between the idea of being spiritual or secular, but the discussion is deeper than that. Social work identity is in spirituality, it is in the history, woven throughout the Code of Ethics and is identified by those currently in the social work field. The discussion then becomes more about proper and effective care. Social work is a field that has become known for its evidenced-based practices. Spirituality is one of those evidenced-based practices for even the most severe cases such as suicidality and substance abuse, yet social workers are leaving their education programs feeling ill-equipped to utilize or even discuss spirituality with their clients, forcing them to figure it out on their own accord. Therefore, spirituality needs to become a more widely accepted and comfortable topic if social work identity is to be preserved.

APPENDIX A

MASS EMAIL INFORMATION

The following is a general template followed for each participant reached out to:

"Good Morning [Potential Interviewee Name],

My name is Alexis Garcia-Irons and I am working on recruiting participants for my research project. It involves a 15-20 minute interview discussing your practice experience with spirituality and how this has played (or not played) a part in your clinical practice.

I was informed that you were interested in participating. Would you like to set a day and time for us to meet? I am on CSUSB campus on [specific days], but can accommodate your schedule time if need be and we can meet anywhere convenient for you.

Please let me know if you have any questions!"

(Developed by Alexis Garcia-Irons)

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview consists of demographic questions and 12 open ended questions. The interview will last approximately 15-20 minutes. You can provide as much or as little information in answering each question and have the option to skip any question. You are free to end the interview at any time.

Age: _____

Licensure (Title(s)): _____

Achieved Years of Secondary Education (beyond bachelors): _____

Years of Clinical Experience: _____

Practice Interests:

_____

Current Agency:

_____

     Faith-based? (Y/N) _____

1.   How do you define 'spirituality'? Religion?

2.   Tell me about the role spirituality has in social work.

3.   What level of importance does spirituality have in social work practice?

4.   Tell me about a time you were confronted with using spirituality with a client in practice? How did you handle this encounter?

5.   What has your experience been like in working with clients regarding spirituality?

6.   Do you feel that spirituality can be beneficial to a client's recovery?

7.   Walk me through what you feel when a client brings up the topic of spirituality in session?

8.   How comfortable do you feel with the topic of spirituality in practice?

9.   Do you believe social work has an obligation as a profession to discuss spirituality?

10.   Do you feel your education and training sufficiently prepared you to discuss spirituality with clients?

11.   Do you feel there should be more or less training on spirituality in the social work field?

12.   What opportunities are available to you to enhance your knowledge regarding spirituality and social work?

(Developed by Alexis Garcia-Irons)

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SAN BERNARDINO

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

INFORMED CONSENT: The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the views held by social work practitioners in San Bernardino County regarding the place of spirituality in social work. The study is being conducted by Alexis Garcia-Irons, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Davis, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the views held by social work practitioners in San Bernardino County regarding the place of spirituality in social work.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked of a few questions on their perspective of the integration of spirituality and social work, current use of spirituality in practice, feelings of preparedness regarding spirituality in practice and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: Potential uncomfortability with research topic questions.

BENEFITS: Participants may gain new insights in research topic.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Davis at (909) 537-3839.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2018.
****
****

I agree to be recorded: _____ YES _____ NO

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

_____   _____
Place an " X " mark here   Date

APPENDIX D

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your input will assist the social work

field in better understanding spirituality in the context of social work practice.

Your input may also help guide Social Work faculty at CSUSB in gaining a better

understanding of spirituality in social work and may help guide social work

curriculum at CSUSB. All information gathered for the purpose of this study will

be destroyed upon its completion. An E-version of this study will be available to

you in the winter quarter of 2018. If there are any concerns please contact Dr.

Davis (phone number).

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