



# Faith and Field: The Ethical Inclusion of Spirituality within the Pedagogy of Social Work

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This article discusses the ethical inclusion of spirituality within the pedagogy of social work education. Field internships become the opportunity for social work students to put into practice the theories and knowledge they have obtained within the classroom. The inclusion of spirituality as a concept according to the Council on Social Work Education is not only a demonstration of one's cultural competence, but a part of one's ethical responsibility. Teaching students to complete a thorough bio-psychosocial-spiritual assessment then becomes an integral component of the social work educational experience, which would enhance the student's ability to fully engage their clients.

As professional social work practitioners, many of us have experienced numerous encounters with clients who brought their faith, religious beliefs, and spirituality into the work we have done together. As social work educators, we are accountable for training our students around the significance of spirituality as part of developing a culturally competent practitioner. We are also charged with the role of professional models for students as a way of demonstrating effective practice skills from a culturally competent holistic perspective. Working and teaching from a holistic and culturally competent platform concludes that the inclusion of spirituality in the pedagogy of the profession is not only significant, but necessary.

Based on the client's expressed need or desire to include conversations about their faith, we have found that these concerns cannot be relegated to another service provider, such as the chaplain or pastoral counselor, but must be considered an integral part of social work practice within the field experience. As advanced practice social work clinicians, educators, and service providers, we cannot afford to ignore or overlook such an important aspect of a client's lived experience. Social workers are guided by Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Standards of Practice (CSWE, 1995, 2001) to include spirituality as part of our responsible cultural competency requirements. We must also make use of the spiritual assessment instruments afforded the professional clinician. Listening to the client and incorporating the tools create the foundation for the discussion of faith and/or spirituality. Utilizing the concepts of spirituality and/or religion often help to make meaning of the struggles clients may be facing.

The client might be attempting to utilize their belief system as a strength which aids their ability to practice resilience. The inclusion of the client's expressed faith and/or spirituality may provide a deeper level of commitment by the client and the practitioner to the ascribed work, along with providing a valuable opening into how best to incorporate what the client brings as a way to facilitate effective change. As we collaborate with our clients on their healing journeys, we are afforded an opportunity to become better holistic practitioners and educators.

The purpose of this article is to strongly acknowledge the significance of faith and spirituality in people's lives and its integration into field education. We will provide a meaningful context from a historical and ethical perspective to view the inclusion of spirituality in urban social work practice. Based on both experience and a cultural competence lens, it is our hope that persons engaged in social work education will come to understand the importance of the inclusion of spirituality as an important part of the lived experience of clients as a learning and teaching tool.

### **Exploring the Concepts and Establishing Context**

The question regarding a connection between spirituality and social work in the United States is explored by Canda and Furman (2009) who outlined five broad historical phases tracing the development of linkages between spirituality and social work in the United States. Hutchinson (2013) provided an expansive descriptive outline of these historical phases.

(1) The indigenous pre-Colonial period, which includes the thousands of years when indigenous cultures in North America employed a variety of spiritually based approaches to healing and mutual support to include the well-being of the earth and other living things as well.

(2) Sectarian origins, which began with the Colonial period and lasted through the first 20 years of the 20th century when early human services, institutions, and social welfare policies were significantly impacted by Judeo Christian worldviews on charity, communal responsibility, and social justice. There were also competing explanations of human behavior, which ranged from distinguishing moral blame or merit (the worthy versus the unworthy poor) and the social reform and social justice focus (e.g. Jewish communal service and Christian social gospel). Human service providers typically had a strong spiritual foundation for their work but offered service through non-sectarian means (e.g. Jane Addams and the settlement house movement). According to Hutchinson (2013), it was during this time African American, Spanish, and French Catholic spiritual perspectives also contributed to the evolution of social work.

(3) Hutchinson (2013) cites Siporin (1986) and Imre (1984) who stated that beginning in the 1920s and throughout the 1970s the professionalization and secularization of social work created the distancing of the profession from its early sectarian roots. This movement mirrored a shift within the larger society, which began to replace moral explanations of human problems with a scientific and rational understand-

ing of human behavior. The social work profession increasingly relied on scientific empiricism and secular humanism as the major foundations for its values, ethics, and practice approaches. Hutchinson (2013) indicates that this period also witnessed social work's reliance on a variety of emerging psychological and sociological theories (such as a psychoanalytical, behavioral, and social functionalism) which did not recognize the spiritual dimension as significant for either understanding human behavior or as a focus for practice. Hutchinson (2013) identified Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services, Lutheran Social Services, and the Salvation Army as religiously affiliated agencies who continued to provide services from a spiritual perspective. According to Robbins (2006), non-sectarian spiritual influences were also felt, including principles of 12-step programs; humanistic, existential, and Jungian thought; and ideas about human development drawn from Eastern religions.

(4) Canda (1997) and Russel (1998) identified a resurgence of interest in spirituality within the spiritual dimension of social work that began to emerge in the 1980s through 1996. According to Hutchinson (2013), this resurgence was marked by an increase in the number of publications and presentations on the topic of spirituality along with the development of a national Society for Spirituality and Social Work (SSSW), and the first national conference on spirituality and social work held in 1994. This substantial activity brought with it an infusion of new and diverse perspectives on spirituality which has influenced the profession, including: Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Shamanism, Taoism, and transpersonal theory (Hutchinson, 2013). According to research conducted by Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, and Miller (1992) and Canda (1988), this period is different from an earlier sectarian period because it emphasized the need to address spirituality in a way that recognizes, and is inclusive of, the values of diverse spiritual traditions and respects client self-determination. Based on research by Lindsay and Gallop (1999), a trend towards the reexamination and reintegration of spirituality within the profession corresponded with increased interest within the larger population.

(5) From 1995 to the present, the profession has witnessed the transcending of boundaries included in a re-introduction of references to religion and spirituality in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 1995 Curriculum Policy Statement and 2001 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards after an absence of more than 20 years (Hutchinson, 2013). Hutchinson (2013) cites scholars such as Besthorn (2001), Canda (2005), Coates (2003), and Meinert, Pardeck, and Murphy (1998) in stating that new postmodern perspectives on spirituality have also entered the arena, including feminist, eco philosophical, post-colonial, and expanded transpersonal frameworks which have broadened the focus of spirituality to include all peoples, all nations, all beings, and the planet itself, with a special concern for marginalized and oppressed groups. Sheridan (2004, 2009) provides supportive evidence of the increased growth of empirical work during this time period to include over 50 studies of social work practitioners, faculty, and students. Hutchinson (2013) states the focus has clearly shifted from whether the topic of spirituality should be included in the profession to how to integrate spirituality within social work practice in an ethical, effective, and spiritually sensitive manner. However, even with the preponderance of empirical evidence and scholarship, the ability to blend or integrate spiritual components overtly within the framework of field education may continue to be challeng-

ing.

With the emerging diversity of students who come to the university and engage in the field experience from divergent faiths, students develop social work skills in working with people of multiple religious and spiritual beliefs similar to and different from their own. While social work is centered on empowering individuals, families, and communities, when considering cultural competency within the social work profession, religion and spirituality are inseparable elements.

### **Importance of Faith and Spirituality**

Faith and spirituality, while an important component of most people's individual lives, is but one part of their overall makeup along with their physical, intellectual, and emotional self. Taken together they comprise the whole person. Scholars such as Murray and Zentner (1989), Koenig (2004), and King (2007) contend that the spiritual aspect of human life is worth mentioning and for many African Americans, spirituality is the foundation upon which their lives are built and from which decisions about every aspect of their lives emanate (Akbar, 2004). It is from a culturally and spiritually competent perspective that when social work students begin their practice with diverse urban based individuals and communities, they must have knowledge of the value systems of their clientele. Nearly everyone has a world view which is based on his/her life experiences. One part of one's world view is one's spiritual beliefs. Student social work interns would benefit from developing an understanding of religion and spirituality as a way to ground their thinking in this area as they work on micro, macro, and mezzo levels. Many times spirituality and religion are thought to be synonymous. For the purposes of this article, the following definitions by Griffith and Griffith (2007) are used:

Spirituality is a commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness between one's self and other people, one's physical environment, one's ancestors, and a Higher Power, or God. It places relationships at the center of awareness, whether they are relationships with the world or other people, or relationships with God or other nonmaterial beings. [...] Religion represents a cultural codification of important spiritual metaphors, narratives, beliefs, rituals, social practices and forms of community among a particular people that provides methods for attaining spirituality, most often expressed in terms of relationship with the God of that religion. (p. 15-17).

Both social work practitioners and social work students need to be clear about their own spiritual beliefs as a part of self-awareness. Practitioners and interns must never force their personal spiritual beliefs on clients or allow the spiritual beliefs of their client to influence their work with clients. Practitioners and social work students must learn to be non-judgmental regarding a client's spiritual beliefs, which is a part of the process of becoming culturally competent.

If a client should inquire about a practitioner's or student's spiritual beliefs, both the student and practitioner must be clear that their spiritual belief is in no way meant to influence the client's beliefs or values.

The practitioner and student must be very clear that the client must think through this matter on their own or with their spiritual advisor.

It is as important that a practitioner or social work intern masters “spiritual competence” as they master cultural competence. If they are not knowledgeable about what a client describes as their spiritual beliefs, they must research the topic in order to have a meaningful conversation with the client about their spiritual beliefs and how their beliefs impact their lived experience and decision making. This research can be as simple as a conversation with the client where the student allows the client to take the lead in explaining their spiritual beliefs. In this instance, the student intern’s role consists of non-judgmental questions in order to ascertain a clearer understanding from the client. This information can also be achieved through the use of spiritual assessment tools, such as those developed by Hodge and Williams (2002) and Puchalski and Romer (2005).

The following are some additional considerations for practitioners and social work interns. The list is not meant to be all inclusive or exhaustive. Practitioners and interns must remain objective about issues related to spirituality just as they would any other issue.

- Should a client challenge a practitioner’s or student’s spiritual beliefs, the practitioner or student must address this challenge as they would any other. This process becomes part of the student’s learning experience.
- Should a client inform the practitioner or student that they have no spiritual beliefs; the client’s position must be accepted and not judged.
- Should a practitioner or student encounter problems related to spirituality when working with a client, they should discuss the matter with their supervisor as they would any other problem presented by the client.
- Practitioners and students must realize that there is no “right” or “wrong” in this area and ensure that the right to self-determination is honored at all times (CSWE, 2001).
- Practitioners and students must recognize that within an urban setting there exists a diverse population accompanied by a wide variation of religious and spiritual beliefs. Each of these differences can serve as mutual learning experiences for all involved.

## **Integration of Spirituality and Cultural Competency**

### **Social Work Education**

According to Hutchinson (2013), two major rationales have been proposed for including content on spirituality within undergraduate and graduate studies. The first rationale is that religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are part of multicultural diversity. Social workers should have knowledge and skills in this area in order to work effectively with diverse client groups. The second rationale is another dimension of human existence beyond the biopsychosocial framework that can be used to understand human behavior. Social work education should expand this framework to include the spiritual dimension. According to Hutchinson

(2013), it would be of value to have a foundational appreciation of religious beliefs and practices taught in social work programs. The social work knowledge of human functioning has strong spiritual underpinnings, making it of utmost importance in our diverse world to find common ground in all human interaction. The spiritual component only enhances what is in the social worker's tools of operation and serves to enrich the student's learning process.

The signature pedagogy of social work is field education. The vehicle for providing field experiences is through internships located in public and private social work agencies and organizations. The field internship is the established time for students to integrate acquired social work skills and knowledge with practice in an assigned and supervised setting. Within these settings, students experience contact with children, adults, families, and communities of both cultural and ethnic diversities. While working with clients, students are recognizing that an understanding of spirituality is likely to become a desired aspect in addressing various problems. All facets of the client's life should be covered in the engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation phases of social work practice. An integral part of the engagement process might include a conversation with the client regarding their spirituality or the significance of spiritual beliefs in their lives. The information obtained from this conversation should also be considered for relevance in the assessment, intervention, and evaluation phases as well.

Instructing students in the practice of assessment would be the starting point from which we can begin the inclusion of spirituality within the practice process. Providing students with assessment tools to include a spiritual self-assessment can have a direct impact in their learning process. Implementing a spiritual self-assessment may serve to empower students in becoming more self-reflective regarding their own values and spiritual beliefs. Helping students to develop a high level of self-reflection might serve to positively influence their ability to empathize with clients for whom spirituality is an integral factor in their own lived experience. Scholars such as Canda and Furman (2009) published an implicit spiritual assessment tool that does not focus on religion but more on the impact of spirituality upon one's daily life experiences. The assessment tool developed by Puchalski and Romer (2005) utilizes four domains focusing on the importance of faith and/or beliefs, spiritual and religious community, and the manner in which the client wants to be addressed. The FICA Spiritual Assessment Tool was developed primarily for use within the medical setting, which can be utilized by social work students completing internships in host agencies. Hodge, Sand, and Williams (2002) posit the use of spiritual ecomaps as a way to assess the significance of spirituality for African American families. However, they also indicate the lack of knowledge most students have regarding the use of spiritual assessment tools. Spirituality and faith, while an important component of most people's lives, can also serve as a strength in how they manage their daily existence. Spirituality is one part of their overall makeup along with their physical, intellectual, and emotional self. Taken together, they comprise the whole person.

The completion of a biopsychosocial-spiritual assessment by social work practitioners and students provides the foundation for the development of treatment approaches and ultimately treatment plans from a holistic prospective. When the assessment is incomplete or when the client's experience of spirituality is

not included, one must contend the treatment process may not be as effective or as efficient as they could be. Not recognizing spirituality as a strength will limit the ability of social work students to see beyond pathology and fail to recognize resilience. Integrating spirituality in social work field education becomes a necessary and vital component in the student's educational process.

### **Case Example**

Students engaging in the field experience have diverse faiths. The demographics of the communities in which they complete field internships represent this same diversity. Therefore, it becomes apparent that students develop those needed social work skills to work with people of multiple religious and spiritual beliefs similar to and different from their own. Part of the field practicum course is to help students in the field separate their belief systems from those of their clients.

During the interview with the social work intern, the client revealed that family relationships have become strained and steadily deteriorating. This situation is the result of the client not attending the funeral of a family member due to her recent conversion to a new religion. Her new religious beliefs do not condone attending funerals of non-members, which for her family is considered less spiritual and more doctrinal. She has experienced anger, anxiety, and frustration towards her from her family, causing her to experience alienation from her family. This information must be considered an important factor in working with the client.

In field education, the idea of spiritual involvement in the field placement can become distracting. However, the awareness of religion and spirituality is discussed with the client based upon the client's own religious beliefs and practices. Engaging in spirituality is not a consideration for being placed in a field setting; however, this example provided the student the opportunity to understand the significance of spirituality in a client's life. This also provided a new perspective for the student and it indicates the importance of faith in social work field education.

### **Discussion**

The magnitude and depth of one's faith can determine one's response to life threatening situations. The inclusion of one's faith in response to life transitions, such as aging, physical disabilities, natural and un-natural disasters, and loss of economic support, may assist clinicians in their care of the client. Understanding each of these dynamics becomes an integral part of the student's learning experience. Thus the significance or recognizing the value of spirituality in work within the diverse urban community will serve to enhance social work students on their educational journey. Social work students learning to apply classroom knowledge through field work must come to understand the significance of spirituality for many of their clients, families, and communities. The inclusion of this knowledge will assist the student, support the client, and may help to improve relationships in the community. As such, it seems imperative that the integration of spirituality within the classroom and pedagogy of the student's professional growth would be most beneficial and, more importantly, considered a mandatory component of the social work educational process. Barker (2007) states that effective social work practice in the 21st century cannot ignore

the diversity of spiritual and religious paradigms represented in the United States and across the world. According to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) developed by CSWE (2001), spiritual development is applicable to the understanding of human behavior, and religion is mentioned in sections 1.2 and 3.0 in the context of professional practice without discrimination (Barker, 2007).

The challenge for the inclusion of spirituality within the environs of a social work program centers on the sensitivity of the topic for both the instructor and the student. Coholic (2006) indicates a level of anxiety in both student and educator regarding spirituality, and the need to create respectful and safe space within which this topic can be discussed and the diversities of faith that will be included. The need to value individual opinions as well as the need for both student and educators to enter the conversation with an informed sense of self and a willingness to hold one's personal beliefs in abeyance will help create a safe and respectful learning environment. Larkin (2010) developed a pilot project which ultimately proposes a curricular module for field education to help students and educators explore a method of professional development from a spiritually sensitive perspective. It is similar to the model curriculum developed by Hodge (2002) and helps students to explore their own spirituality and expand their world view, both of which are required to create a holistic perspective from which we expect our students to work with clients, families, and communities.

Educating social work students in the practice of professional social work must be done from a holistic perspective, which includes the acknowledgment and understanding of the spirituality of the clients, families, and communities with whom they will work. In the 21st century, social work educators must take the lead in preparing our social work students to work with a diverse population which means including spirituality as a core component of the professional pedagogy.

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