Social Work Education and Spirituality: 
An Undergraduate Perspective 
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1. Abstract:

Accumulating clinical and research evidence suggests that spirituality, which encompasses many and varied definitions, plays an important role in clients’ lives. According to Walsh (2003), “over the centuries and across cultures, spiritual beliefs and practices have anchored and nourished families and their communities” (p. 337). However, due to the historical separation between the empirical, scientific, and rationalistic paradigms and those of a more subjective, multiple views of reality, spirituality and religious aspects of clients have long been ignored in psychotherapy (Richards & Bergen, 1997). The resurgence of spirituality is evidenced in and across multiple disciplines although it gives rise to numerous ethical, ideological and practical implications for social work practice. In order to include these approaches in practice, social workers must be educated in the complexities and diversities of these approaches. However, there may be a disjuncture between emerging practice needs and religious and spiritual content in social work education (Murdock, 2005). Social work education has only addressed these issues in limited ways with little or no such education as reported by students of one U. S. study (Canda & Furman, 1999).

Results from a curricula review of one undergraduate program at a Canadian university indicate a limited focus on issues of the spiritual and religious dimensions in social work education classes. Such material is only being presented in courses on diversity issues and alternative ways of knowing themes. In efforts to bridge the ways of knowing, it would be important to consider individuals’ spiritual/religious beliefs as a way of treating clients holistically by incorporating their most fundamental beliefs and values. Social workers need to acknowledge that religiosity/spirituality is often ingrained in the very core of clients’ lives. Further research is required to examine the viability and complexities of including such curricula in social work education.

Key Words:
religion, spirituality, social work education, undergraduate

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2. Introduction

Social work is viewed as “holistic focusing on the person-in-environment, acknowledging the psychological, emotional, physical, and social aspects of the individual” (Epple, 2003, p. 173). However, this definition of healing and helping the “whole person” neglects the person as a spiritual being, which may also be a defining aspect of each individual. As Pierre Teilhard DeChardin stated, “[w]e are not human...
beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience” (as cited in Eppele, p. 173).

Postmodernism has seen a resurgence in spirituality, religion, and multiple views of reality, away from the empirical scientific and rationalistic paradigms (Bullis, 1996; Hugen, 2001a, Lindsay, 2002; Smith, 1998). This general shift in ideology also requires social work education and practice to shift from the secular, scientific ideology of the modern era (Hugen). Although some models for spiritual practice are currently being used in the areas of hospice, healthcare, mental health settings, and international social work, this area of practice is fraught with complexities given that increased immigration from the diverse cultures of the world has resulted in an ever expanding range of spiritual and religious diversity (Hugen, 2001b, Smith).

3. Definitions of Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are complex concepts and the academic literature abounds with varying definitions and little consensus. Spirituality and religion are different domains and thus must be defined separately. According to Chile and Simpson (2004), religion denotes the “faith-based institutions through which belief systems and practices become recognizable in particular practice traditions” (p. 319). These traditions are supported by the community and are preserved over time (Canda & Furman, 1999). In keeping with this theory, Hugen (2001b), states that “[r]eligion incorporates cultural, structural, and historical elements as well as personal spirituality” (p. 10), while Lewis (2001) indicates that the “heart and soul of religion” can be defined as spirituality (p. 232). According to Walsh (2003), spirituality can be defined as:

- an overarching construct, refers more generally to transcendent beliefs and practices. Spirituality can be experienced either within or outside formal religious structures and is both broader and more personal...Spirituality involves an active investment in an internal set of values and fosters a sense of meaning, wholeness, harmony, and connection with others (p. 6).

Chile and Simpson (2004) define spirituality as “the inner self that defines who we are. [which] involves the relationship between the individual, the collective, and the universe” (p. 319). Consistent with this definition, Canda and Furman (1999) state that "[s]pirituality relates to a universal and fundamental aspect of what it is to be human—to search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral frameworks for relating with self, others, and the ultimate reality” (p. 37).

To simplify the understanding of this phenomenon, Canda and Furman (1999) have developed two conceptual models of spirituality. These models could also assist social workers in grasping the relevance of spirituality and what this means to their clients’ experiences. The first model of spirituality is a holistic one that examines spirituality in relation to the bio-psycho-social model of the person and the environment (Canda et al., 1999). In this model spirituality is a fourth relevant component of the person, which along with the psychological, biological, and sociological aspects, comprises the wholeness of the individual. The authors argue that the spiritual aspect is “fundamental to human nature and infuses the other aspects” (p. 47). Their second model is an operational model in which spirituality is viewed "as an aspect of human
experience…depicted in terms of its various manifestations of spirituality” (Canda, p. 49) including such categories as spiritual drives, experiences, functions, development, as well as contents of spiritual perspectives and spiritual expressions. Grof and Grof (1989) coined the term spiritual emergence to refer to the process of individuals awakening to a sense of the transpersonal or spiritual domain within the context of their psychosocial development throughout the live cycle (as cited in Canda).

Canda and Furman (1999) do acknowledge that alternate worldviews and religions such as Zen Buddhism may be atheistic in nature and thus not require belief in spirits or the supernatural. However, they argue these religions or worldviews nonetheless ground individuals within “ultimate concerns and experiences” (p. 57). Since the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of spirituality and religion for social work education, a specific definition of spirituality will not be used but the meaning of spirituality will encompass the various definitions articulated.


Spirituality has existed for centuries and has been an important part of society and influence in individuals' lives. According to West (1981), “[h]istorically, spiritual resources have supported social movements such as civil rights, welfare rights, labour and peace” (p. 5). Further, Walsh (2003) stated:

Over the centuries and across cultures, spiritual beliefs and practices have anchored and nourished families and their communities. Families have lit candles, prayed together, meditated, and quietly turned to faith for solace, strength and connectedness in their lives. At times of crisis and adversity, spiritual beliefs and practices have fostered recovery from trauma, loss and suffering (p. 337).

The Canadian social work context finds its roots in the social gospel and settlement house movements of the turn of the 20th century (Moffatt, 2001), although it has not always been an easy alliance as noted by Wills (1992) and Todd (2004). More recently, spirituality has occupied a marginalized position and has been considered taboo within social work (Canda & Furman, 1999; Walsh, 1999).

In recent practice, according to Smith (1998), “[s]ocial work, with its holistic focus on person-in-environment, has acknowledged the importance of mind, body, spirit integration” (p. ix). By incorporating and allowing for the expression of an individual's spirituality, social workers are contributing towards the integration of all aspects of themselves into a healthy whole growing in personal integrity (Canda & Furman, 1999). Not only do individuals find meaning for their own lives but they also build more meaningful connections to others (Canda et al., 1999). Further, Hodge (2005a) indicates assessing the spiritual aspects of individuals can be a significant avenue for determining clients' strengths and building and capitalizing upon those strengths in the helping process. However, Richards and Bergen (1997) proposed that religious faith and spiritual concerns of clients have long been ignored within psychotherapy as a consequence of the historical separation between the behavioural sciences and religion. This oversight of the spiritual side of the client may result in clients not benefiting from the ‘total' care that could be possible.
5. **Spirituality/Religion in the Helping Professions**

The resurgence of spirituality is evidenced in disciplines such as nursing, medicine, psychology, and social work. In nursing, spirituality and faith have been found to make a positive difference in the health of patients suffering from various illnesses (Wright, 2005) and assists in the recovery from different health concerns (Kissman & Maurer, 2002). Richards and Bergin (1997) highlight the role of spirituality in psychology by stating “[w]hatever the reasons may be, society’s renewed interest in spiritual issues has influenced the field of psychology and seems to have contributed to a greater openness to the consideration of religious and spiritual perspectives in mainstream psychology and psychotherapy” (p. 43).

Social work literature is increasingly focusing on spirituality and many areas of the profession already incorporate the spiritual/religious realm in working with their client populations. Spirituality in social work practice has been identified as facilitating authentic relationships between clients and practitioners thus providing hope and sustaining practice (Nash & Stewart, 2005). The literature also reflects an increased emphasis on the role of spirituality in healing (Kissman & Maurer, 2002) as evidenced in the treatment of addictions, mental health, and bereavement. Increasingly practitioners are interested in acquiring knowledge about the effects of spirituality on mental or physical health and the benefits of including clients’ spirituality in treatment (Kissman et al., 2002). The health benefits of having strong faith may include increased longevity, less anxiety, coping better with stressful life events, lower blood pressures and stronger immune systems (Kissman).

International social work literature also notes that some social workers are considering the spiritual aspect of clients’ lives in their practices. For example in their work with the Bedouin in the Muslim Arab world Al-Krenawi and Graham (2003) advocate that since “traditional healers [and] religious personnel…are a part of the complex help-seeking processes” (p. 84) in these communities, it is important for workers to consider and work with these aspects of their clients’ lives. Graham (2006) concludes that “spirituality is a superb venue for social work’s continued effort at being significant to the world’s diverse people” with the “potential to engage multiple perspectives” (p. 64).

Gerontology is another area of social work in which the use of faith based practices appears to be significant. Blazer (1991) notes that older adults report both spirituality and religion are the third most frequently used coping and instrumental support mechanisms after family and governmental support (as cited in Lewis, 2001). Many older adults find their spirituality helps to promote healing during suffering and bereavement. Kissman and Maurer (2002) advance that “[w]hether coping with one’s own imminent death or the death of a loved one, spirituality has been found to play an important role in helping individuals transform their realities from painful existence to release from suffering during bereavement” (p. 39). Spirituality and religion can also play a protective role in the mental health functioning of older adults. For this population, spirituality has been associated with increased happiness and life satisfaction as well as a higher level of adjustment. It also serves as a protective factor against depression, maintains meaning for those nearing the end of life, and provides supports in the process of death and dying (Lewis, 2001). Changing worldviews and emerging literature...
in this area are compelling reasons for social workers to incorporate the spiritual domain in the helping relationship given their mandate to work ethically and anti-oppressively to serve their clients.

6. **Spirituality/Religion for Ethical and Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice**

   It is important to include religion and spirituality in the helping process in order to work ethically in the profession (Canda & Furman, 1999; Moore, 2003). Baskin (2002) calls for an “action-oriented spirituality” to resist oppression and guide political activism. Many of the core values of the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005) suggest the need to incorporate the spiritual dimension within social work practice. Values such as client self-determination, “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence” (p. 5) are suggestive of a more holistic view of person in their environment. Workers are required to regard their clients' wellbeing as their professional obligation and as such serve them without discrimination, which includes discrimination on religious grounds. Just as social workers need to be concerned with human diversity, they also need to be cognizant of spiritual diversity since spirituality is often embedded within culture (Canda et al., 1998). In essence, they need to become spiritually sensitive as well as culturally sensitive. Indeed Béres (2004) advances that social workers must reflect upon the ways in which their spirituality influences their practice in order to provide socially just and ethical practice. Thus, including spirituality in social work is as important as other aspects of diversity, such as multicultural, culturally competent, and holistic approaches. As such, spiritual education would be consistent with and derived from the profession’s ethical standards (Hodge, 2005b). Yet concerns have been articulated about pedagogical issues arising from the interaction of religion and spirituality and anti-oppressive practice particularly for students with diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations (Todd & Coholic, 2007).

7. **Awareness for Anti-oppressive Practice**

   Social workers must have an awareness of how the spiritual/religious domains have implications for anti-oppressive practice. As Dominelli (2002) proposes identity formation can be a major arena for oppression through inequalities of power relations and discrimination. She argues that identity formation is “intricately bound up with people’s sense of who they are and who others are in relation to themselves” (p. 37). Since spirituality is becoming accepted as an essential component of the wholeness of individuals, so too is spiritually an important part of an individual’s identity (Canda & Furman, 1999). Workers should have competence in this area so they “do not unintentionally invalidate clients” (Moore, 2003, p. 560) or oppress them by not being open to exploring this aspect of their identity. Practitioners must also examine their own spirituality and religious dimensions for biases (Canda et al., 1999; Miller, 2003; Moore, 2003; Sermabeikian, 1994) for a spiritual bias can be as harmful as racism or sexism (Sermabeikian). Further, while spirituality and religious affiliations can be a major source of strength for individuals, these domains can also be dysfunctional, controlling, and a cause of client oppression (Sermabeikian) and thus may necessitate skilled and sensitive examination.
Since religions and spiritual practices are based in a cultural context, the potential for cultural discrimination and religious or spiritual discrimination exists (Canda & Furman, 1999; Sermabeikian, 1994). Dominelli (2002) states “those who endorse racist ideologies with regards to culture engage in a series of activities that are aimed at patrolling cultural boundaries in or to retain their privileges” (p. 79). Social workers must then become both culturally competent and spirituality sensitive in order to understand how the dominant culture views the spiritual and cultural beliefs of their clients and how they are using power dynamics to control the cultural boundaries (Dominelli).

Additionally, workers must be aware of how certain religious and spiritual groups may oppress their members with similar power dynamics. Canda and Furman (1999) have highlighted some of the issues of diversity in spiritual and religious domains faced by women and those of minority sexual orientations. For example, although women are more physically visible in religious organizations, their writings and voices have been largely absent from the domain (Canda et al., 1999). The heterosexism assumption of many religions stigmatizes and discriminates those of different orientations (Canda). Awareness of these dynamics is not enough and social workers must work towards inclusivity and social justice for the oppressed (Dominelli, 2002).

Dominelli (2002) advocates collective action as “a crucial vehicle of resistance available for developing strategies that aim to reduce current forms of oppression” (p. 180) by “promot[ing] social justice and individual and collective empowerment” (p. 183). From the anti-oppressive perspective, individuals’ private problems are public concerns (Dominelli, 2002). Canda and Furman (1999) and Hodge (2005b) also support this view suggesting that collective action and social policy changes in the religious and spiritual domains, which oppress individuals, must be a mandate for social workers. However, Canda and Furman (1999) further stipulate that only when workers are spiritually whole themselves do they have the energy to pursue goals of justice and social change for those who have been, and are still being oppressed.

On a micro level, it is important for therapists/counsellors to recognize the role which spirituality/religion plays in their clients’ lives. With the understanding that “spirituality is often an intensely personal concern, both for families and therapists…practitioners should carefully monitor client’s responses to ensure they are not venturing into an area that families might desire to leave undisclosed” (Hodge, 2000, p. 24). It is also important for counsellors/therapists to recognize all clients may not embrace spirituality/religion and to respect their clients’ choice (Canda & Furman 1999). Counsellors/therapists should also be careful of not transferring their own spiritual beliefs or convictions onto their clients (Hodge).

Workers must be mindful of their own abilities with regards to practicing from an anti-oppressive framework. Hodge (2000, 2005b) cautions therapists to be aware of any value conflicts with the spiritual or religious traditions of their clients and to examine their own abilities to practice effectively and anti-oppressively in these circumstances. Further, counsellors/therapists, who share the same spiritual traditions as their clients, should be mindful to resist any urge to fall into the role of spiritual director and to remain focused on utilizing the clients’ spiritual resources to ameliorate the presenting difficulties (Hodge, 2000). These circumstances would be ameliorated if social work
education provided the necessary training for practitioners to be comfortable in addressing spiritual or religious matters as they appear in counselling.

8. Indications for Social Work Education

Walsh (2003) proposes that many clients seeking therapy are not only in quest of practical skills, but also “seeking deeper meaning and connections in their life” (p. 354). Given the resurgence of matters of the spirit, clients often want to explore or incorporate their spiritual beliefs when seeking help and will often mention spiritual or religious practices, without prompting, early in their sessions (Hodge, 2005a). Statistics Canada (2001) has reported that 7 out of 10 Canadians identify as Roman Catholic, Hindu, Muslim or other Protestant faiths, indicating that most Canadians regard themselves as having some degree of religious affiliation. Additionally, spirituality and religion is often a component of the issues clients present for therapy. Given these factors, it then behoves the profession to be more sensitive to the clients’ spirituality in treatment and, “[w]hatever the practitioners’ own beliefs, experiences and feelings, it is essential to study the implications of spirituality as part of the whole person” (Compton, 1998, p. 29 as cited in Henery 2003). Thus, it is incumbent upon the social work profession to include spirituality in the training of its workers.

The importance of having adequate training in including or handling spirituality in counselling/psychotherapy is emphasized in the literature (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Walsh, 1999). Richards and Bergin (1997) state:

Just as therapists need to seek training to help them enhance their skills and sensitivity with respect to issues of gender, race, and other aspects of diversity, they also have an ethical obligation to increase their skills and sensitivity with clients who are religious and spiritually oriented (p. 6).

In order to include spirituality and religious approaches in practice social workers must be educated in the complexities and diversities of these approaches (Gray, & Gray, 1999; Hodge, 2005b; Hugen, 2001a; Miller, 2003; Okundaye, Russel, 1998). Not only must social workers understand their own spiritual and religious beliefs and values, they must also be sensitive to the many religious and spiritual beliefs of their clients (Hugen, 2001a; Moore, 2003). Clews (2004) provides two examples of reflective assignments which facilitate the integration of spirituality within students social work practice which could be included in the curriculum. Walsh (1999) encourages clinicians to examine their own ethical and spiritual positions, since the therapeutic process involves the interactions of core beliefs of therapists and clients. While spiritual and religious beliefs may be lodged within the cultural framework, according to Miller (2003), clients’ identity and beliefs may be quite different from the norms of that culture and their beliefs. Along with understandings of spiritual and religious diversity, workers must also understand issues of discrimination which may be associated with certain beliefs and practices (Hodge, 2005b).

Finally, social workers need to be educated in some of the emerging theories of spirituality and its relation to individuals for a better understanding of how spirituality and religion affects persons and their environments (Bullis, 1996; Carroll, 1998; Canda, 1998; Canda & Furman, 1999). Hodge (2000, 2001, 2005a) has written extensively
advocating for spiritual assessments with clients. He has developed several assessment methods including pictorial tools such as spiritual lifemaps and spiritual ecomaps, as well as the taking of oral spiritual histories. According to Hodge (2001), these methods could also be used as tools and techniques for interventions.

When clients enter into a therapeutic relationship, they are carrying various issues and problems and are seeking help in resolving these issues. Hence, therapists/counsellors need to be prepared to deal with a great variety of issues. For social workers to adequately intervene with clients they need to be trained in the many tools and techniques that are required to best serve clients (Hodge, 2001). However, in a national survey of U.S. social workers, 73 percent of respondents reported receiving little or no education of the spiritual and religious domains in their social work education (Canda & Furman, 1999).

9. Objective

To further explore this issue an analysis of one undergraduate level social work curriculum was conducted. The investigators were interested in determining the amount and types of content related to religion/spirituality dimensions identified in course outlines. A study of course curriculum was undertaken to determine the number of courses with content of spiritual/religious dimensions.

10. Method

Course outlines from the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work Bachelor of Social Work Program website (http://fsw.ucalgary.ca/main.htm?page=ce_programs.shtml) were retrieved on January 23, 2007. Courses from satellite campuses (Access, Edmonton, and Lethbridge) were also included. All course outlines for core, elective, and practicum seminars from winter semester 2005 to and including fall 2006 (N=149) were examined. Electronic key word searches were performed using spirit and religion on three levels: course titles, course content, required/additional reading materials.

Social work course outlines invariably include information for students regarding course texts required and often instructors stipulate additional readings such as journal articles to expand and inform class discussions. These readings are generally included in the outlines within the course content section. Additionally, often a further list of journal articles or book chapters of related course information is included in course outlines to assist students with assignments or research papers. This list of materials is usually describes as required or additional readings. It is an important distinction since the readings required in the course content would likely be utilized in classroom discussions whereas the additional readings would be optional for the students’ own exploration.

Of the 149 course outlines examined results from the key word search showed no course outlines had spirituality or religion as key words in the course title; twenty-four (16%) of the course outlines had spirit/religion key words in the course content and twenty-two (11%) of the course outlines had spirit/religion key words in the required/additional course readings.
11. Discussion

Despite mounting evidence supporting the relevance of spiritual education for social work practitioners the present analysis revealed minimal inclusion within the formal curricula as assessed through analysis of course content. This concurs with a recent study by Caholic (2004) who found that educators and students in social work programs in Ontario revealed that discussions about spirituality occurred were taking place, however most of these occurred outside of the formal setting amongst groups of students or individually between educators and students. Research studies from the United States indicate that the majority of social work students received little or no “training” on spirituality in their programs (Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994; Sheridan & Hemert, 1999; Miller, 2001).

The study was limited by the analysis of course outlines of the undergraduate program of only one university and thus does not generalize across Canadian Schools of Social Work nor allow for an understanding of the role of the issue of spirituality/religion in the informal course content as mediated by instructor consultation, class discussions, or individual student driven content. Spiritual/religious issues may be included within general diversity course work and thus may not appear as keywords.

Additionally, keywords may be limiting (e.g. Aboriginal or Indigenous studies with spiritual components may use alternative language. Coates, Gray and Hetherington (2006) have indicated “the recent attention to the importance of the environment and spirituality and the paradigmatic shift that such issues require, has created a welcoming space for indigenous voices” (p. 389). Literature has shown an emergence in spirituality as well as environmental issues (Coates, et al., 2006). This reappearance of interest in the spiritual and environmental concerns, stemming from such concerns as security in light of terrorism and the search for meaning in response to postmodernism, has created space for alternative knowledge (Coates). Search for meaning and sustainability, which spirituality and ecology has emphasized, makes it possible to accept and value alternative perspectives (Coates). According to Coates, Gray, and Hetherington (2006), “[t]he acceptance of these alternative knowledge systems has created a welcoming and inclusive context enabling the celebration of diversity and the sharing of knowledge” (p. 389). Social work values the person in environment concept and this is believed to include one’s spirituality (Coates). In support of this position, Graham (2006) has indicated that “spirituality is a viable, and potentially effective source of engaging with…the recently rejuvenated movement to render social work relevant to the international communities in which it occurs: to indigenize, or…localize, social work’s knowledge base” (p. 63).

This preliminary analysis highlights the limited focus on issues of the spiritual and religious dimensions in this undergraduate curriculum. However, given the complexity of the spirituality and religious domains for individual’s lives, it is important that social workers have knowledge and competences in these areas (Bullis, 1996; Canda & Furman, 1999; Hodge, 2005; Moore, 2003). There is emerging recognition by some social workers that these issues need to be addressed as evidenced by the formation of Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work in 2005 (“About CSSSW”, 2007). The Society has hosted several conferences in this subject matter and “is governed by a small group of academics and practitioners who are committed to scholarship and the
development of effective practice in the area of spirituality and social work” (“About CSSSW", 2007).

Recommendations for Social Work Education

Despite the mounting evidence of interest in this domain, as the research of the of one university curriculum indicates, no courses on spirituality and religion are currently being offered and it appears that limited content is presented in other ways in the curriculum. Perhaps instructors are reluctant to broach this type of pedagogy due to its complex, sensitive, and diverse nature. It may be related to a lack of appropriate training, tools or techniques or instructors may view the content as irrelevant. However, educators are calling for a more intentional inclusion of spirituality in the educational process (Amato-von Hemert, 1994; Coholic, 2003; Csiernik & Adams, 2002). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine how spirituality and it’s relevance for social work practice may be taught in classrooms, increasing research has emerged which explores ways of broaching this subject matter in the classroom which are outlined below.

12. Tools and techniques

Several tools and techniques for incorporating the spiritual domain into social work practice situations have been proposed (Bullis, 1996; Hodge, 2000; Hodge, 2001; Miller, 2003). Miller (2003) argues that since the spiritual domain is such a sensitive personal area for most people, clients must have a feeling of safety for sharing. Miller advances the following strategies to meet this objective. Counselors must show an open and accepting manner to encourage exploration at these deeper levels. When clients feel comfortable and workers have assessed clients’ specific beliefs and values in the spiritual and religious areas, several techniques useful for facilitating the development of clients’ lives in these areas have been described by Miller (2003). Workers can utilize and encourage clients’ religious activities by the use of techniques such as prayer, referral to the religious community of the individual’s beliefs, and bibliotherapy, which “refers to the use of books or other reading material to assist clients in their healing process” (p. 199). Other techniques proposed include journal writing, meditation, relaxation, imagery, focusing work, and the use of rituals to connect to feelings and bring meaning to life situations. However, due to the sensitive nature of these domains in clients’ lives, she cautions that workers must have skills and training before attempting these techniques in practice.

Bullis (1996) stresses the importance of clients’ spiritual health and proposes spiritual assessments be used as a tool in this regard. He advocates obtaining spiritual histories from clients and also from their parents, partners and significant others, which will glean the spiritual beliefs and/or the religious afflictions and how they have impacted individuals lives. As a way of operationalizing the abstract concepts of spirituality and clarifying spiritual values and beliefs, Bullis (1996) suggests the use of spiritual genograms, spiritual maps, drawing spirit bodies, and creating spirit masks. Similarly to Miller (2003), Bullis recommends referral of clients to participate in spiritual groups as well as the use of meditation, relaxation, visualization, and “exploring spiritual elements in dreams” (p. 58). Derezotes (2006) also noted that clients’ spirituality is best evaluated as part of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual-environmental (BPSSE) assessment. This...
assessment includes individual factors, environmental factors and fractal analysis (p. 18). Further to assessing clients’ BPSSE, Derezotes (2006) also recommends that clients’ Spiritual-Religious Identity (SRI) be assessed. Spiritual-religious identity involves categorizing clients’ spirituality and religiosity based on their unique characteristics for example, strong religious and strong spiritual identity or strong religious and weak spiritual identity.

13. Conclusion

Hodge (2000) has indicated that developing a clear understanding of a client’s relationship to spiritual systems is of growing interest among therapists. He noted that by addressing what numerous clients hold as a central constituent of their lives, clinicians send a message that they value and respect this spiritual component of their clients. As the literature on spirituality is closely examined, it is evidenced as important for therapists/counsellors to be addressing spirituality in the therapeutic process if they are to truly assist clients in healing. If counsellors/therapists continue to assist clients with the many varying presenting problems there is a need to be aware of the role that spirituality plays in their lives. In practicing anti-oppressively with clients, it is important to draw on clients’ strengths. He further suggested that in determining a client’s primary strength, “assessing spirituality embodies the strengths and solution-oriented perspective by tapping into the potential resources in an area that often informs every facet of existence” (p. 227).

Results from a curricula review of one undergraduate program indicate a limited focus in social work training as it relates to spirituality and religion. It then begs the question, how can social workers attend to clients’ spiritual and religious dimensions when they have had very little training on the dynamics and implications of this complex domain? Although the spiritual and religious dimensions of individuals’ domains have only been included in social work education in a limited way, it is an area of much complexity and importance for consideration in a holistic, person-in-environment focused, and anti-oppressive practice approach. The spirituality/religious perspective has important implications for anti-oppressive social work practice since it can “oppress clients as well as liberate them” (Moore, 2003, p. 2). Social workers must be aware not only of how they may inadvertently oppress clients, but also of how the larger society and the spiritual and religious domains themselves may oppress individuals (Canda & Furman, 1999; Dominelli, 2002). To work ethically and empower clients in this area, advocacy and social justice and thus attention to spirituality must become an important part of social work practice (Canda et al., 1999; Hodge 2005b). Emerging theories, tools, and techniques inform this area of practice, which has been used for some time in the areas of hospice, healthcare, mental health settings, and international social work (Canda; Graham, 2006, Smith, 1998). Spirituality and religious beliefs and practices can be powerful tools of strength and empowerment for individuals and must be explored in greater depth and become a consideration for social work education and practice.

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