

Providence College

DigitalCommons@Providence

---

Social Work Theses

Social Work

---

May 2008

## A Call For The Spiritual Dimension To Be Included In Social Work Education

Stephanie Sullivan

Providence College, ssulli20@providence.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/socialwrk\\_students](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/socialwrk_students)



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

Sullivan, Stephanie, "A Call For The Spiritual Dimension To Be Included In Social Work Education" (2008). *Social Work Theses*. 24.

[https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/socialwrk\\_students/24](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/socialwrk_students/24)

It is permitted to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) users must make these conditions clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work.

A CALL FOR THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION TO BE  
INCLUDED IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

Stephanie Sullivan

Providence College  
Providence, Rhode Island

2008

Stephanie Sullivan  
A Call for the Spiritual  
Dimension to be Included  
in Social Work Education

Abstract

Spirituality is a concept that is not easily definable and because of that, many people shy away from fully understanding how one's belief system can affect other factors in life. As a professional social worker, it is one's duty to look at the whole individual because every system is intertwined with another. When pondering over whether or not aspects of spirituality is used in everyday social work practice, one must ask the question about the worker's view on spirituality. This qualitative research study shows how spirituality in social work is arguably important both personally and professionally in the profession. After reviewing the results on this study, it shows that the participants were split between whether or not spirituality can be taught to professional workers. This is due to the fact that the majority of the participants feeling that spirituality is a personal journey in which one partakes. However, the majority also thought that training in spirituality would be beneficial for one's practice because it is important in understanding a family's dynamics.

## I. Introduction

### A. There is no educational unity that teaches spirituality among the Social Work profession

1. Most Social Workers that reported using religious/spiritual based interventions in their practice also reported having no such content included in their professional education (Graff, 2007, p. 244).
2. No clearly stated definition:
  - a. Spirituality is: within the past ten years, more attributes of spirituality have been identified that are particular to that of the social work profession:
    - having the individual seen in his own dignity
    - having one search for meaning in one's life
    - having one have a sense of wholeness
    - having an individual participate in forms of growing closer to God such as prayer (Furman, 2005, p. 816).
  - b. "Spirituality is defined as the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and for some, God" (Bullis, 1996, p. 2).
  - c. Spirituality: "having the individual seen in his own dignity, having one search for meaning in one's life, having one have a sense of wholeness having an individual participate in forms of growing closer to God such as prayer" (Furman, 2005, p. 816).
3. There are many forms of spirituality (to name a few):
  - a. Within the Christian tradition, spirituality centers on a set of beliefs that are found in the Creeds and the doctrines of the Church, and on a set of values based on hope and the promise of redemption.

- b. However, at the heart of Islam spirituality lays Allah and one's obedience to him.
- c. And moreover, Jewish spirituality pertains to having a deep relationship with God and His eternal covenant.

B. There are standards in place but no correct practice

1. Show statistics saying you have to work with people in a holistic view
2. Show where we have spirituality in the social work profession
  - a. The CSWE in 1994 and 2003 came out with statements that added "religion" to the aspects that define "human diversity," which was a major step because human diversity is one of the social work's core values (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 24).
  - b. Also, in 1996, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) revised its Code of Social Work Ethics to incorporate a religious component as part of a Social Worker's Responsibilities (Furman, 2005, p. 818).
3. How much literature is there where it looks at organized vs. non-organized, and what's being mandated
  - a. First, scholars have examined Christian influences on the origin of social work in both the UK and the US. Secondly, an interest in the current status of religion and spirituality in contemporary social work practice and education has emerged in both countries (Furman, 2005, p. 814).
  - b. In response to such views, a 1997 national survey on religion and spirituality in social work education and practice was designed and implemented in the US, which collected empirical data regarding social workers' beliefs, views and practice tools. The study was replicated in the United Kingdom in 2000 (Furman, 2005, p. 814).

4. Explain how the profession is struggling to generate information about spirituality and not sure how to include it

## II. Main Points

- A. Spirituality needs to be addressed. In social work we call this: Relational Spirituality; it looks and draws on the holistic view
  1. Because it draws on the Social Work concepts of *working with the whole person* and *building empathy* (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 26).
  2. A relational spirituality perspective is in tune with social work's emphasis on non discrimination and respect for diversity and reflects the reality of today's struggles for social justice (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 27).
  3. This holistic approach includes bio-psycho-social-cultural and a religious/spiritual aspect of the individual and how they all play a vital role in discovering whom an individual is.
  4. The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior; of social and economic, and cultural institutions; and of the interaction of all these factors (NASW, 2007).
  5. A large majority of UK social workers (76%) and US social workers (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that spirituality is a fundamental part of being human (Furman, 2005, p. 829).
- B. Spirituality may be expressed through religious forms, but is not limited to them (Furman, 2005, p. 819).
  1. Christian
  2. Islam
  3. Jewish
- C. Social Workers are utilizing spirituality but had no training in it

1. Moreover, more than 50% of the Social Workers surveyed were utilizing spirituality and religion in working with clients, yet 73% of Social Workers in the United States had no training in this area (Heyman, 2006, p. 13).

D. Spirituality should be talked about amongst every population group because it effects every group

1. With everyone, not just the elderly (which is commonly thought)
2. 50% or more of NASW social workers who believe it is appropriate for all of the client issues presented in the questionnaire. (Furman, 2005, p. 828)

E. How to implement training

1. Through workshops
2. Through classes within the curriculum
3. Through other means- media, print

III. Opposing Points

A. Spirituality should not be addressed

1. Spirituality is something that is personal
2. Spirituality cannot be generalized

B. Only through institutions can spirituality happen

1. not possible in US society to conceive spirituality as unrelated to religion
2. only social work education on spirituality can happen through institutional means and cannot possibly cover all options

C. Social workers do not need training

1. Many people feel like if they respect others, then why must they take a class?
2. It is through experience that one learns rather than through teaching

D. It's only proper to talk with the elderly or the dying about spirituality

1. Research has shown that later in life, spirituality becomes more important to people. And as a result, many professionals feel that spirituality is a pressing issue now more than ever because of the baby boom era and their increase towards old age.

E. Types

1. Atheist person
2. Suicidal
3. abuse within religious sector

IV. Hypothesis

- A. There is a need for a curriculum, but also it is about having experience. So in light of that, a factor is whether or not the professional worker is spiritually oriented.
- B. What programs have spirituality been infused in? One would assume that not many. It would be expected that the more spiritually oriented a professional worker is the more likely they would be aware and respect their client's spirituality.

V. Methodology

A. Sample:

Type- qualitative study, which has to do with "stories"

How selected- Convenience sample



Number- Five social workers from the Court Appointed Special Advocate office--Four of which are out of the Providence office, and one is out of Kent County.

#### B. Data Gathering:

Method- It is going to be done through a questionnaire.

Tools- Attached is the questionnaire and give sample questions throughout

Variables- Dependent variable-awareness that the worker has of the client's belief system.

Independent variable- the worker's own spirituality

#### C. Data Analysis:

Content analysis-study of content of communication

Internal validity because the professional social worker is aware of their spirituality, then they are more apt to be aware of their client's.

Looking at the participants' responses and processing the similarities and the differences.

#### D. Findings:

Most important feature that was found is that all of the participants stressed objectivity. The public should be made aware of spirituality.

External validity---would these responses hold for generalizing for the whole population of social workers?

### VI. Conclusion

#### A. Restating:

Problem- that spirituality is indefinable.

Hypothesized- the more spirituality orientated the worker, the more aware they will be of the client's spirituality.

Results- hypothesis is true.

Conclusion-There is a need for awareness of the topic of spirituality.

B. Implications for Social Work:

For practice- the topic of spirituality needs to be included in the social work education curriculum.

For research- needs to have more qualitative and quantitative studies done

For policy- spirituality needs to be separate from cultural competency

## Preface

In this research study, it discusses how spirituality in the social work profession is a concept that is easily misunderstood. Spirituality is a personal journey for an individual and should be taking into consideration when working with clients. Whether or not the aspect of one's belief system should be addressed through trainings, through the social work education curriculum, or not at all, it is an aspect that defines who an individual is. Therefore, spirituality is an important concept that individuals should be made aware of within the social work profession.

## Introduction

At the very heart of social work practice is the desire to work with individuals on a wide array of issues. An important feature of social work is the ability to consider the individual as a whole. Keeping this in mind, one quality of the individual that is very often assimilated into other aspects, such as cultural competence, is the dimension of a client's spirituality. Spirituality is actually an element all on its own. A way to isolate and educate social workers on spirituality is to inform them through education, which is based on formally prepared curriculums.

Although many social scientists have tried to define what exactly spirituality is, there is still no clearly stated definition. "Spirituality is defined as the human quest for

personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and for some, God” (Bullis, 1996, p. 2). Whereas another researcher describes spirituality as “ having the individual seen in his own dignity, having one search for meaning in one’s life, having one have a sense of wholeness having an individual participate in forms of growing closer to God such as prayer” (Furman, 2005, p. 816). Overall, the general consensus is that searching for meaning in one’s life is necessary for personal connections with others to develop. It is the belief in a higher power (God, destiny, etc) and finding meaning in such a higher power, which will somehow answer life’s most important questions. It is important to understand what spirituality is because then the general population will all be on the same page in terms of what one looks to in a belief system.

Just like there are many definitions to what exactly spirituality is, there are many forms of spirituality. Some of the major examples would be Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Within the Christian tradition, spirituality centers on a set of beliefs that are closely associated with the Creeds and doctrines of the Church. In comparison, the spirituality of Islam lies with the individual’s obedience to Allah. Jewish spirituality is focused on an eternal covenant with God, rather than a strict following. What differs from organized and non-organized is that organized spirituality steams from an instituted religion. Non-organized spirituality is limitless and can be a mix of a person’s own private feelings.

Due to the broad range of characteristics associated with spirituality, the practice of social work needs to better equip itself with the tools to inform clients of the benefits of a spiritual life. “Therefore, because professionals need knowledge, it is critical that the curriculum for becoming a practicing Social Worker include issues of spirituality in their education” (Heyman, 2006, p. 13). The social work practice can do this by unifying a curriculum and educating the future social workers on spiritual awareness. If unification occurred at the educational level, the social work profession would have a more in-depth knowledge of ways to relate to clients in a holistic way.

As a social worker, one deals with how a person relates to not only himself or herself, but also with the surrounding community. Before a social worker can begin helping the client improve his or her life, the worker must discover who the client is and what he or she is searching for. A human being seeks to know who they are and for what purpose that they have been put on Earth. A spiritual belief in a higher power allows the client to find that particular purpose in his or her life. This realization is important because once it takes place, the true fundamentals of social work can begin to be applied to the needs of the individual client.

As stated earlier, there is a great need for a spirituality-centered curriculum to be introduced to the social work profession. This introduction needs to address spirituality as a major component of process by which one is defined and shaped. In 1994 and 2003, the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) implemented new standards relating spirituality to the profession (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 23). Other standards that are similar to

spirituality, but certainly not the same, added “religion” to the aspects that define “human diversity” (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 24). This was a major step in incorporating a spiritual dimension into the profession because human diversity is one of the core values of social work. As one can see, although there are standards in place where the term “spirituality” can be found, there is still no set curriculum. This lack of training does not help the worker recognize a person’s viewpoint and treating them in accordance to those beliefs.

The move from having limited discussions about spirituality talked about within its own context, to the implementation of a spirituality curriculum, is a major leap for both the U.S. and other countries around the world. In 1994, the CSWE recommended that content on spirituality be included in core curriculum courses at schools of social work throughout the United States. Moreover, in 1996, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) revised its Code of Ethics and placed religion and spirituality under ‘Vulnerable Populations at Risk for Prejudice and Discrimination’ (Furman, 2005, p. 833) which incorporates a religious component as part of a social worker’s responsibilities (Furman, 2005, p. 818). Also in the past decade in the United Kingdom, the topic of religion and spirituality has begun to enter the professional discourse (Furman, 2005, p. 833). All of these statistics are important because it shows how the social work profession is advancing through the years.

An important milestone, however, is that there is a growing interest in bringing spirituality to the forefront of the social work practice. Research suggests that many clients want to integrate their spiritual beliefs and values into clinical settings (Hodge,

2006, p. 637-638). A recent study conducted proves that incorporating spirituality into the profession can have an impact on the clients that the profession serves. A large majority of U.K. social workers (76%) and U.S. social workers (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that spirituality is a fundamental part of being human. Similarly, 60% of the U.S. respondents agreed or strongly agreed that when combining the social work practice with a spiritual component, there was a better chance to empower clients than without that combination (Furman, 2005, p. 829). This is significant because spirituality is seen as being such a vital part of who an individual is.

A major setback, though, is that much of the literature and research done on spirituality thus far has been on organized spirituality, which the general population loosely calls “religion.” However, to better understand how one can make the spiritual dimension more prominent, he or she has to understand the difference. Religion and spirituality are not the same. In order to teach this difference, a strong curriculum has to be put into effect so that social workers can better serve their clients. The individual clients will then become more educated on spirituality, and in turn have the ability to educate others. The cycle of awareness will begin to form, but it needs to start from within the profession.

Addressing spirituality through education

*The holistic view*

Within the social work profession, there is a need for spirituality to be formally addressed. This can occur through a well-organized curriculum, which would allow all social workers to be trained and educated on the definition of spirituality and what it means to an individual's system. With this education comes knowledge of a client's way of life, and shows that the social worker respects and values the client's dignity and personal beliefs.

In social work, relational spirituality is defined as the type of spirituality that draws upon the holistic view of an individual person. This holistic approach includes bio-psycho-social-cultural and religious/spiritual aspects of an individual. Then those aspects are further discussed to explain the vital role they all play in describing who an individual is. "The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior; of social and economic, and cultural institutions; and of the interaction of all these factors" (NASW, 2007). Being able to see an individual in the context of the entire person is a quality that every social worker must possess in order to adequately help a client.

Relational spirituality draws on the social work concepts of working with the whole person and building empathy (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 26). When working with clients, it is important to understand the client's beliefs because those viewpoints point to how one lives his or her life. Social work is not only about seeing the whole person, but it is also about how each person is unique. Spirituality is "in tune with how the social work



profession emphasis on non-discrimination and respect for diversity” (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 27). When respecting a client, a social worker must always be cautious of how he or she is communicating both verbally and non-verbally with one’s client. Drawing upon the holistic view is vital when trying to work through an individual’s numerous intermingling of factors.

### *Organized spirituality*

As mentioned before, there are many different levels of spirituality and people can interpret them in many diverse ways. Spirituality can be expressed through organized religious institutions but are also not limited to them (Furman, 2005, p. 819). Organized spirituality differs from non-organized spirituality because it stems from an instituted religion. When one identifies that their beliefs are geared towards a specific religion, it does not necessarily mean that he or she are religiously devoted to that institution. Likewise, when one says that he or she is spiritual that does not mean that that individual is religious. Non-organized spirituality is limitless and can stem from either putting together many organized institutions’ ways of thinking, simply just one’s own personal feelings, or a mixture of both.

To name just a few of the instituted religions, there is the Christian way of looking at spirituality, the Islamic way, and the Jewish way. Within the Christian tradition, spirituality centers on a set of beliefs that are found in the Creeds and the

doctrines of the Church. This spirituality is based on a set of values, which looks toward the promise of redemption. Within the heart of Islamic spirituality lies Allah and one's obedience to him. Finally, within Jewish spirituality, there is a deep relationship with God and his eternal covenant. Organized spirituality is important because it allows for individuals to just simply get involved and believe in something with a community of people.

#### *Non-organized spirituality*

Non-organized spirituality is harder to define because of the vast ways in which one can look at their own spirituality. Clients who fall within this category may also be harder to identify as feeling spiritual because it is not as clearly visible to the outside world. However, within the social work profession, it would be helpful to know and understand what spirituality is, in order to understand where the client is coming from. As a social worker, one must be knowledgeable in the area of spirituality in order to better serve their client and to help foster changes that are beneficial to the client system. As one can see, there are various degrees of feelings that an individual can experience in terms of spirituality. Although there are many different levels of spirituality, it is important to note that there is a common theme that unites all of spirituality is the belief that a higher power is guiding you.

### *Training*

Within the social work profession, a gap has developed between dealing with spirituality, and having the knowledge and skills necessary in order to work with a client about spirituality. Research has shown that in terms of spirituality, there has been no formal training for social workers in their educational years on how to properly discuss and deal with spirituality in their practice. “More than 50% of the Social Workers surveyed were utilizing spirituality and religion in working with clients, yet 73% of Social Workers in the United States had no training in this area” (Heyman, 2006, p. 13). This figure shows that more than half of all clients are not getting the proper assistance that they require. Without the proper guidance, the client’s chance of changing for the better with their overall system network diminishes.

A major concern is the lack of education because as a social worker, a client looks to the worker to provide answers. If a social worker does not have the proper training in a particular field, wouldn’t that be the same as fraud in terms of not being truthful of one’s credentials? Moreover, “neither the NASW (National Association of Social Work) nor the CSWE (Council of Social Work Education) provide social workers with guidance for ethical decision making on the use of spirituality in practice. Despite this, most social work respondents report incorporating various forms of spirituality-oriented activities in their professional work” (Lee, 2007, p.4).

This seems troubling that the two leading advocates for educating future social workers do not seem to think that spirituality needs to be addressed within the confines of

an education. These two organizations work to advance the capabilities of the social work profession. It is imperative that these groups, as well as the entire profession, come to terms with the need for training about the benefits of incorporating spirituality into the practice of social work. Once this shift in principle occurs, a true advancement in the social work profession can develop.

There is a disconnect between stating that spirituality should be included in a social worker's education process, and actually observing courses laid out and taken by students. Two advantages in the attention given to spirituality occurred in the 1990's. In 1994, the CSWE recommended that content on religion and spirituality be included in core curriculum courses in schools of social work throughout the United States (Furman, 2005, p. 833). Also, in 1996, the NASW revised its Code of Ethics and placed religion and spirituality under 'Vulnerable Populations at Risk for Prejudice and Discrimination' (Furman, 2005, p. 833). However, one decade later, there is still a need for a well-organized curriculum to allow spirituality to be implemented into the social workers' education. It does not help to just state what spirituality falls under in the Code of Ethics. There needs to be action into providing education on what spirituality actually is and how it impacts the clients' lives.

Recently, social workers have reported using religious/spiritual-based interventions in their practice. At the same time, however, many also reported having no such content included in their professional education on how to use those interventions correctly (Graff, 2007, p. 244). This concern points to the need of having some sort of

universal education being taught to future social workers so that as a professional worker, one can skillfully help a client. Since there are some many forms of spirituality in the world, there needs to be a unified way of teaching a social worker how to deal with those different types. “Social workers must be trained across many different disciplines because spirituality is an interdisciplinary world” (Bullis, 1996, p. 33). Being trained in spirituality will lead to a better understand between the professional worker and for their clients.

### *Beneficial for all*

At the turn of the century, 78% of the general population reported they felt a need to grow spiritually (Gallup, 2000). Due to this, social workers need to be careful about thinking that spirituality is only prominent in a certain age brackets. Contrary to popular belief, it is not just the elderly that seek spirituality in their lives. In actuality, spirituality affects every population group and is often found in their specific situations. “Some 50% or more of the BASW social workers believe that it is appropriate to raise the topic of spirituality in a non-sectarian manner with clients regarding terminal illness (76%), foster parents (68%), those suffering a natural disaster (55%), and with the bereaved (74%)” (Furman, 2005, p. 828). Despite the various characteristics present in the various generations today, spirituality is one of the few commonalties.

Having a way to infuse spirituality into education for social workers would be beneficial to the social worker, the client, and the profession as a whole. For a social worker, one would feel more prepared and capable when dealing with a client with a different perspective. Since spirituality can be such an important aspect of a client's life, the social worker needs to feel that he or she is capable of handling any situation that may arise relating to spirituality. In addition, spirituality becomes an additional resource that the social worker can use to dive deep into the heart of the client's system.

For the client, he or she would feel more respected by his or her social worker and would be more apt to open up to the worker. This allows for a greater ease of communication between the social worker and the client. If these lines of communication are not able to develop, true progress cannot be made regarding each client's situation.

Finally, for the profession, it would bring unity and universality among the social work practice because every licensed social worker would be educated in and practicing the same material and implementing this spiritual approach into a client's system. Spirituality would also allow the social work profession to advance its capabilities as it relates to all different types of ethnic groups. The social work community could greatly benefit from its ability to be more inclusive to the needs of an ever changing population. Providing education on spirituality would be beneficial for the worker, the client, and the profession because it would help with bringing about clarity and understanding.

### *Implementation*

One suggestion on how to mandate that every practicing social worker go through training on spirituality is by making more people aware that spirituality is not just an idea that is attached to cultural competence; rather, it is a key aspect in how an individual identifies himself or herself. Spreading information to social workers and the public about spirituality is a much-needed entity so that the social work profession can continue to help serve their clients. Widespread results show that social workers that have taken a course in spirituality have a more positive attitude toward the role of religion and spirituality in the social work practice than those who did not take such a course. Therefore, it is critical that the curriculum for becoming a practicing social worker should include spirituality in their education (Heyman, 2006, p. 13).

There are several possibilities for implementing spirituality into the education of social work practice. Social workers who are still in the process of completing their degrees in higher education can have this training easily incorporated into their curriculums. For social workers that already have their licenses, this training can take place along side as each social worker completes his or her required continuing education seminars. Spirituality lectures can also be given at yearly conferences, and followed up by articles to be placed in the *Journal of Social Work*. The more ways in which spirituality is presented to the social work community, the faster it can be implemented into the individual practices.

In closing, spirituality is a very important aspect of a client's life, and as a result of the social work values, spirituality needs to play a bigger part within the profession.

In spite of growing interest in this area, ambiguity and confusion existed among social workers on how to effectively address spirituality in practice. Such gaps and disconnects may prevent the identification and exploration of crucial supports and coping skills for clients. The infusion of spirituality in social work education can create an opportunity to develop the pedagogy of human dignity, consistent to professional obligations (Lee, 2007, p. 17).

In order for that to happen, however, future social workers need to be educated on what spirituality is and the effects it has on the individual client.

### Addressing spirituality through experience

#### *Personal experience*

In the social work profession, a concept that researchers believe is that spirituality does not need to be formally addressed in a social worker's education, nor in one's practice. As previously mentioned, spirituality is a complex matter which lacks a clearly stated definition. To fully understand what spirituality is one only has to look to personal experiences and instituted religions.

Spirituality is an individual and personal belief that cannot be measured against someone else's. "Spirituality is one's search for the sacred that can be viewed subjectively, occurs internally, and is pursued through seeking a relationship with whatever one holds sacred" (Hyman, 2006, p. 278). Whether believing in one God or many, the point of spirituality is to focus on the relationship between oneself and a higher



being. Individualistic religious identity is an expression of individual feelings and faith towards a personal relationship with God (Cohen, 2007, p. 715). When one recognizes that relationship, he or she will be able to be more open and intimate on a personal level. No amount of education can teach what is personal to someone's beliefs.

Interesting enough, there is a point in one's life in which a great deal of personal growth occurs. The point at which this happens is in the early years of adolescence. "Independence in thinking about these issues mostly occurred in adolescence, a time of opposition, idealization, and personal discovery" (Simmonds, 2005, p. 249). That adolescent yearning to know oneself by asking questions about one's faith and by trying to understand what one believes is what carries over into adulthood. This is important to understand because only through one's experience can there truly be growth in one's spirituality.

### *Cannot be generalized*

One cannot generalize what spirituality encompasses due to the fact that it is a belief that is specific to one's own system. "Since everyone's experience of the spiritual is somewhat different, the only way counselors [social workers] can possibly know what is true for their clients is to ask" (Leseho, 2007, p. 446). Posing this question helps promote respect towards the client's individuality. It also shows that the worker understands that each individual is unique and special in how he or she lives. Educating a

worker by making generalizations would not be beneficial, but rather wouldn't help at all. On the contrary, this could be detrimental to the long-term success of the social worker.

A thought to keep in mind is that what works for one religious group may not be for another group (Hyman, 2006, p. 265). In light of this, it is not fair for every client to be categorized based on the beliefs of a specific religion or culture. Every religious culture varies in individualistic and collectivistic aspects of religiousness and spirituality (Cohen, 2007, p. 209). The difference must remain in not generalizing and universalizing individuals and/or cultures in a set educational curriculum but rather seeing people for who they really are and what they represent in terms of their personal beliefs.

### *Only through institutions*

In the United States, our society makes it impossible to conceive spirituality as being unrelated to that of religion. "If religion is the implementation of rules that guide human behavior and the organized practices of rituals, one may conclude that these rules would also guide one's expression of spirituality. Therefore, even if one does not identify with a formal religion, one would need a means by which to practice his spirituality, this means would be in essence one's religion" (Hyman, 2006, p. 280-281). Many times these two concepts and words are used interchangeably. "The essence of religion is spirituality and the essence of spirituality is how we understand and practice prayer" (Leseho, 2007,

p. 448). One flows from the other, so in order to understand what spirituality is you have to understand religion and all its implications.

There is an overlap between these two concepts, which makes it virtually impossible to clearly define boundaries between them. In a recent study, a group of professionals in the area of religious studies commented on how these two labels were connected.

Of the survey sample, 37.5% stated that spirituality is a broader concept than religion and includes religion, 18% stated that religion is a broader concept than spirituality and includes spirituality, 28% stated that religion and spirituality overlap but they are not the same concept, 17% stated that religion and spirituality are the same concept and overlap completely, and 0% stated that religion and spirituality are different and do not overlap. In general and in conclusion, 83% of the religious professionals thought that there was some overlaps between the terms religion and spirituality (Hyman, 2006, p. 269-278)

With that being said, social work education on spirituality can only take place through institutional means. This is clearly because spirituality is so closely tied to institutionalized religions (Leseho, 2007, p. 446). However, due to the vast number of instituted religions, the education cannot possibly cover all possibilities. In turn, the more prominent religions should be paid closer attention to. According to a Gallup Poll (2000), the highest percentages of the population include Protestants with 58%, whereas Catholics (Roman and Orthodox combined) represent 26%, and Jews came in with 2% (Russell, 2006, p. 431). Understanding that spirituality can only take place through an institution is significant because then the person can see the limitations of spirituality.

### *Through practice*

In the area of spirituality, social workers have been torn between the idea of being trained on particular belief systems and how that training will effect the interaction between clients and workers. The avoidance of imposing one's own values and respecting your client, are qualities that can be picked up as one's experience in the profession grows. A professional worker can also argue that through talking with a supervisor about a particular client, respect can be given to that individual's belief system (Russell, 2006, p. 436). Living through experiences and being able to connect to people on a human level is what social working is about. Real-life, hands on situations can do a much better job of teaching someone about spirituality, rather than hearing about it in a classroom atmosphere.

### *Types of people*

Another reason why training is not necessary, and sometimes harmful to the social work profession, is because the social work field is made up of various types of people. When exposing different types of people to the issue of spirituality, one must also be cautious in preventing clients from being offended in that exposition. The types of people that should not be exposed to spirituality should not be, due to circumstances within their lives. Perfect examples of those individuals are atheists, people who are

suicidal, people who blame God, and finally, people who hold opposing stances with religious institutions in terms of moral issues.

If an atheist was a practicing social worker and did not want to be schooled in spirituality, his or her right of beliefs should be respected. At the same time, it is possible for the client to consider himself or herself an atheist. Those beliefs have to be respected. Incorporating spirituality into the practice may help those individuals who consider themselves to be spiritual, but it runs the risk of alienating those who have opposing views.

In terms of the suicidal client in the social work practice, the thought that there is an after life and higher being watching over them could tip the scales of them wanting to seriously hurt themselves. Talking about spirituality with a client may cause that person to feel that he or she has reached the final point where life does not have meaning. As a professional worker, one has the responsibility for the well being of a client. By providing this spiritual option to an unstable client, it is creating a recipe for disaster.

In the days, weeks, and months that follow the loss of a loved one, many people look for someone to blame. Most of the time this blame falls on God or another form of a higher being. Similarly, when someone is abused, they turn their frustration to someone whom they can get mad at. In both situations, the individual should not have to be subjected to hearing a professional explain to them that a higher being has a plan for their life.

Finally, people who share opposing viewpoints on where institutions stand on a moral issue should not be subject to having their views looked down upon. In the social work profession, the worker needs to remain open-minded and if the worker is trained in spirituality, that openness will become more narrow-minded. The client needs to have the sense that the worker is on their side in order for the relationship to flourish and for productivity to occur. If spirituality and views that stem from it allow those two opposing views to butt heads, that relationship can end and the job of the social worker is compromised.

Spirituality is a term that should be associated and brought up with a population that needs to hear it. This population is not the youth or the middle aged, but rather the elderly. The elderly see spirituality as a comforting factor in knowing that there is another life after this one. The sense of loneliness seems to disappear when believing that a higher power is present and watching over. A survey of social workers feel that spirituality has become a pressing issue now more than ever due to the ever-growing knowledge that death is near for the baby boomers. Due to this large population of baby boomers, spirituality needs to be discussed in length with them in order to provide that sense of comfort.

Throughout the profession of social work, several debates have taken place on different issues that researchers have had to come to terms with. Spirituality is the newest of these topics. In terms of the social worker, a course on spirituality should not be mandated as part of a curriculum to be educated on. The basis for mandating this curriculum is not strong enough due to the lack of clarity of what spirituality is.

Additionally, since every individual is unique the social worker would not gain any new information from the incorporation of spirituality.

### Hypothesis

One's spirituality cannot be easily defined. This is due to the fact that spirituality is both a personal experience and one that is in need of concrete evidence. In the social work profession, there is a call for education on the topic of spirituality so that the professional worker can better understand where their client is coming from. However, when discussing spirituality, one must always keep in mind that every individual comes into a situation with their own set of standards and their own set of beliefs. For this reason, one must ask whether or not the professional worker is spiritually oriented. Either way, if the worker is or is not spiritually focused that is going to effect how they relate to their clients.

In this research study, it will center on how much a professional social worker uses spirituality in their particular field. When conversing over this topic, it poses the question, what programs have spirituality been infused in? It would be expected that the more spiritually oriented a professional social worker is the more likely they would be aware and respect their client's spirituality. Moreover, it is also assumed that the less a social worker is spiritually oriented, the less likely they would talk about spirituality in their work.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

In this qualitative study about spirituality in the social work profession, the participants came from a convenience sample of five social workers from the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) office. CASA is an organization that is part of Rhode Island Family Court. This particular organization works with abused and neglected children making sure that their voice is heard within the court system. These five social workers are the only state employed CASA social workers for the state of Rhode Island. Their title is Social Caseworker II. Four out of the five workers are stationed in the Providence office, whereas the other employee is out of the Kent County office.

All of the participants are females. One participant is a Caucasian middle class citizen who is in the 50-55 year old age group who has worked in the court system for over twenty years. Similarly, the second participant is a woman who is also in the 50-55 year old age group and has worked for CASA for almost 23 years. Another participant is a 38 year old who has been with the Family Court for 18 years, however, has only been a Social Caseworker for three years. The fourth participant is a 30-year-old middle class woman, who has been working as a Social Caseworker for eight years. Finally, the fifth



participant in this study is a 31-year-old middle class citizen who has worked in Family Court for eight years. Please see table 1.

Table 1:

|   | Gender | Age   | Experience |
|---|--------|-------|------------|
| 1 | female | 50-55 | 20 years   |
| 2 | female | 50-55 | 23 years   |
| 3 | female | 38    | 3 years    |
| 4 | female | 30    | 8 years    |
| 5 | female | 31    | 8 years    |

### *Data gathering*

Due to the time constraints of the social workers' schedules, this study was performed through a questionnaire that the participants completed and returned. The questionnaire was comprised of 11 open-ended questions ranging from personal stances to professional practice. Several of the questions that the interviewees answered dealt with their own personal views on spirituality and how that comes into play in their practice. Other questions inquired about how they would handle their client's belief system or even if they were taught how to. Finally, the last set of questions asked about the difference between having a training program in spirituality or, if experiencing spirituality through one's profession, is sufficient enough. Please see attached Appendix (i).

Throughout this study, there were two major variables. The first variable was the dependent variable, which is the awareness that the worker has of the client's own belief system. The independent variable was the worker's own spirituality. The questions that most directly pointed to what the dependent variable was asking are questions four, six, eight, and eleven. These questions asked about recognizing a client's belief system. Whereas, questions three, five, and nine all asked for a personal account of the worker's own spirituality.

#### *Data Analysis*

After the initial passing in of the questionnaire and reading over the results, the next step was to process the participants' responses by looking at the similarities and the differences among the answers. The type of analysis done in this study was a content analysis. A content analysis is the studying of the content of communication. This method enabled the researcher to see how the frequent the most commonly used keywords are. The key phrase was that of "spirituality" being a personal journey where the workers' should not impose their views on their clients. However, the outcome of being taught about spirituality would lead to a better understanding of how family dynamics work. An item that should be discussed in this study is that of internal validity. Internal validity is the extent to which the findings of a study accurately represent the causal relationship. This is seen when the professional social worker is aware of his or

her own spirituality and then that worker is more apt to be aware of their client's belief system too. Please see table 2.

Table 2:

|   | Gender | Age   | Experience | “personal journey” | “family dynamics” |
|---|--------|-------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | female | 50-55 | 20 years   | no                 | no                |
| 2 | female | 50-55 | 23 years   | yes                | no                |
| 3 | female | 38    | 3 years    | yes                | yes               |
| 4 | female | 30    | 8 years    | no                 | yes               |
| 5 | female | 31    | 8 years    | yes                | yes               |

### *Findings*

After completing this study, this researcher has seen that, although four out of the five participants considered themselves moderately affiliated towards a religion, the responses to whether or not spirituality should be included in a social work education curriculum were still split between the participants. Three out of the five thought that spirituality was a personal journey. However, three out of the five also thought that training in spirituality would be beneficial for one's practice because it is important in understanding a family's dynamics. Although, all five social workers use spirituality in their professional work, not one could pinpoint how much.

One of the most important features that the participants stressed was that they wanted to make sure that objectivity within a case was placed high on the list of attributes

to watch out for. All of the participants said that although one's personal views are something that one will always carry with one, it is important to try and not impose those views on the client.

When asked if implementing a training in spirituality was a good idea, three out of the five stated that they think that it would be and that they should do so by providing different forms of spirituality as seen in different cultures. Something that is noticeable in the responses to these questions is that professionals are still combining spirituality into the cultural competency category. This speaks volumes about the way in which the social work education curriculum is currently taught to students. These terms are clearly distinct from one another and they should be taught separately due to this fact.

After looking at these results, it is clear that there is a real clear-cut decision on whether or not spirituality can be taught within the confines of a curriculum or in trainings and if that education would be received well by professional social workers. So the question becomes how can a professional social worker advocate for seeking the understanding of another's spirituality. A quote that was received by one of the participants' states perfectly that, "it's more of a matter of raising awareness of how individual clients' experiences with spirituality can be explored as part of the helping process".

There are several issues in this study that resulted because of external validity.

External validity is the extent to which a finding applies to persons, objects, settings, or times other than those that were the subject of study. The first issue arose due to the fact

that there are only five social workers that answered this questionnaire. Therefore, the sample size is not large enough. The second issue is because of the lack of diversity among the genders, there needed to be both males and females represented. Nevertheless, although there are limitations to this study, this study performed and asked the basic question of how important spirituality is in terms of the social work profession. Please see table 3.

Table 3:

|   | Gender | Age   | Experience | “Moderately affiliated towards a religion” | “personal journey” | “Beneficial for family dynamics” | “spirituality in practice” | “stay objective” | “having training” |
|---|--------|-------|------------|--|--------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | female | 50-55 | 20 years   | yes  | no                 | no                               | yes                        | yes              | yes               |
| 2 | female | 50-55 | 23 years   | yes  | yes                | no                               | yes                        | yes              | yes               |
| 3 | female | 38    | 3 years    | yes  | yes                | yes                              | yes                        | yes              | no                |
| 4 | female | 30    | 8 years    | yes  | no                 | yes                              | yes                        | yes              | yes               |
| 5 | female | 31    | 8 years    | yes  | yes                | yes                              | yes                        | yes              | no                |

### Conclusion

After researching the topic of spirituality and how indefinable it can be, the problem of having spirituality infused in the work of a professional social worker without

that social worker being properly trained in how to work to balance one's own with their client's spirituality, has become a great concern. At the beginning of this research, the question that was posed was whether or not a more spirituality oriented professional social worker was more likely to be aware of their client's spirituality. After looking at the data, it is apparent that this is the case. As one of the participant's stated nicely, " I begin and end my day in a very spiritual manner, and throughout the day I practice spiritual exercises...I know that there is a strong connection;" She ended by saying that in order for spirituality to be taught a professional worker needs to understand that there is some sort of connection between the body, the mind, and one's spirit. This is perfectly stated due to the fact that the most important contribution that the social work profession can do for spirituality is to raise awareness that there is such a thing as spirituality and that it does have a major impact on how a client lives his or her life. Her statement is exactly what the social work profession claims to look at; the holistic viewpoint of the individual. As a social work profession this bio-psycho-social-and spiritual approach needs to be addressed in order to fully understand whom an individual is.

### *Implications for Practice*

In terms of the social work practice, spirituality is an area in which many professionals feel strongly enough that it helps shape and define whom an individual client is. Although, not many professionals have been taught on the basis of what

spirituality is, professional workers are still talking about spirituality and what that means to the client in their practice. So in light of that, spirituality needs to and should be implemented into the core curriculum for all students who are learning about the social work profession.

### *Implications for Research*

When thinking about future research in this area, researchers should pay attention to the statistics involved with the success rate of the relationship between worker and client when spirituality is discussed and understood between the two parties. Also, there needs to be more research in both the qualitative method and the quantitative method. If both were represented in numerous studies, the public would be able to get a better feeling on how important spirituality is.

### *Implications for Policy*

Policies relating to spirituality need to be distinct from that of cultural competency because these two things are very different from one another. Spirituality is a concept that cannot be easily defined. However, making students and professionals alike aware of spirituality and how it impacts them and their clients will make for better work

together in the field of social work. When working with clients in the social work profession, the aim is to look at the individual in a holistic viewpoint where everything ties in together with every other feature of one's life. In order for the worker/client relationship to work and for there to be productivity, the aspect of spirituality must be addressed. A social worker must be held accountable for ensuring that the highest quality of work that can be done, and that can only be achieved through knowledge of the whole person. Although spirituality is just a piece of the puzzle, without all of those pieces coming together, there will be gaps. As a social worker, it is in your job description to know and work with those gaps.



## Appendix

1. What college/university did you attend?
2. Where did you go for your masters?
3. Do you consider yourself strongly/moderately/not affiliated towards a religion?
4. What did you learn in your diversity classes, in terms of beliefs and religious practices?
5. How often do your personal views come into your professional practice?
6. Have you ever had training in recognizing your views vs. your clients?

-If so, how much?

-Please explain what the training was like.

7. Do you feel as though there should be some sort of training in spirituality?
8. Would training in spirituality be beneficial for your practice?
9. If you were implementing training in spirituality, how would you do it?
10. Do you think there should be training in spirituality or should it be apart of the social work education program?
11. Can spirituality really be taught or is it something that can only come through experience?

## References

- Bullis, R. (1994). *Spirituality in social work practice*. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.
- Cohen, A., & Hill, P. (2007). Religion as culture: Religious individualism and collectivism among American Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. *Journal of Personality, 75*, 209-742.
- Council of Social Work Education. (2007). Retrieved September 22, 2007, from <http://www.cswe.org/NR/rdonlyres/F212EA0E-8DA4-4358-8C6F-029C8BA168A5/0/SpiritualityandReligionLita.pdf>
- Cnann, R. & Boddie, S. (2006). Setting the context: Assessing the effectiveness of faith-based social services. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work, 25*, 5-17.
- Furman, L., Benson, P., Canda, E., & Grimwood, C. (2005). A comparative international analysis of religion and spirituality in Social Work: A survey of UK and US Social Workers [Electronic version]. *Social Work Education, 24*, 813-839, Retrieved October 8, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com/helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=13&hid=109&sid=d3e4f477-3d66-4da3-8b7b-a0d626fd254d%40sessionmgr104>
- Gilbert, R. (2006). Transpersonal perspectives on spirituality in social work. *Illness, crisis, and loss, 14*, 400-401.
- Graff, D. (2007). A study of baccalaureate Social Work students' beliefs about the inclusion of religious and spiritual content in Social Work [Electronic version]. *Journal of Social Work Education, 43*, 243-256, Retrieved September 23, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com/helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=7&hid=6&sid=61030aa1-e2ca-4afb-b17f-3fd6f9f29aef%40sessionmgr3>
- Heyman, J., Buchanan, R., Marlowe, D., & Sealy, Y. (2006). Social Workers' attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in Social Work practice [Electronic version]. *Journal of Pastoral Counseling, 41*, 3-19, Retrieved September 23, 2007, from <http://0->

web.ebscohost.com.helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=13&hid=6&sid=61030aa1-e2ca-4afb-b17f-3fd6f9f29aef%40sessionmgr3

- Hodge, D. & Boddie, S. (2004). Social workers' personal spiritual characteristics and their conceptualizations of spirituality and religion: A mixed method study. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work*, 26, 53-70.
- Hodge, D. & McGrew, C. (2006). Spirituality, religion, and the interrelationship: A nationally representative study [Electronic version]. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 42, 637-654, Retrieved October 7, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=13&hid=105&sid=1b35fbfa-abdb-43a8-beca-48719e41ef5d%40sessionmgr104>
- Hyman, C., & Handal, P. (2006). Definitions and evaluation of religion and spirituality items by religious professionals: A pilot study [Electronic version]. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 45, 264-282, Retrieved November 20, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=10&hid=109&sid=680377ac-4663-4edb-bf20-218f06be72b9%40sessionmgr102>
- Krieglstein, M. (2006). Spirituality and Social Work [Electronic version]. *Dialogue & Universalism*, 16, 21-29, Retrieved October 7, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=4&hid=107&sid=a5630a87-7302-4b25-a4c8-99504502dacb%40sessionmgr106>
- Lee, E. (2007). Integrating spirituality, faith, and social justice in social work practice and education: A pilot study. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work*, 26(2), 1-21.
- Leseho, J. (2007). Spirituality in counselor education: A new course [Electronic version]. *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling*, 35, 441-454, Retrieved November 30, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=10&hid=109&sid=680377ac-4663-4edb-bf20-218f06be72b9%40sessionmgr102>
- National Association of Social Work. (2007). Retrieved September 22, 2007, from <http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/default.asp>

- Russell, S., & Yarhouse, M. (2006). Training in religion/spirituality within APA-accredited Psychology predoctoral internships. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 37, 430-436.
- Scales, T., Wolfer, T., Sherwood, D., Garland, D., Hugen, B., & Pittman, S. (2002). Spirituality and religion in social work practice. Council on Social Work Education, Inc.
- Simmonds, J. (2005). Other than “the set pattern”: Developing one’s own thoughts about spirituality and religion [Electronic version]. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 8, 239-251, Retrieved November 30, 2007, from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com/helin.uri.edu/ehost/pdf?vid=12&hid=109&sid=680377ac-4663-4edb-bf20-218f06be72b9%40sessionmgr102>