



TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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ISBN 978-1-77385-440-3

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Supporting Spiritual Competencies in Field Education and Practice

Emma De Vynck, Jill Ciesielski, and Heather M. Boynton

Social workers entering the practice field will inevitably encounter children, adolescents, families, and/or communities dealing with adversity, and research has demonstrated spiritual strengths, crises, struggles, and distress are often intertwined with these experiences. Spirituality can arise in any practice area, and may be particularly pertinent with respect to trauma, grief, loss, life transitions, aging and end of life care, pregnancy and abortion, addictions, chronic mental health, illness, relationship issues including sexual infidelity, conflict, divorce, and 2SLGBTQ+ and other related gender and identity aspects. Spirituality is interconnected with cultural humility and competence, and ethical practice. Yet, are social work placement students sufficiently supported to consider spiritual matters arising for those they work with, as well as for themselves, as they enter practicum? While undergoing similar processes themselves, social work students may be tasked to assist clients dealing with spiritual issues, conflicts in their values and worldview, and struggles with coping. Additionally, are field educators and instructors adequately prepared to incorporate a spiritually-informed approach into their supervision of students as well as their practice with individuals, families, and communities? This chapter is written collaboratively from the perspective of three social workers and researchers at varying stages in their professional and

academic paths, but we all share a passion for increasing spiritual awareness and spiritually sensitive field practice in social work. We will present relevant findings on spirituality and spiritual struggles and trauma as informed by our personal practice and research endeavours, and we will link these findings with implications for field education.

Although historically social work has roots in spirituality, explicit focus on this area was suppressed over time. If, in the past several decades, there has been a renewed interest in the necessity of integrating spirituality and religion into the social work curriculum, an important gap remains with respect to its inclusion in field education. Research has revealed that students, academics, and practitioners, as well as clients, have indicated the importance of integrating spiritual and religious aspects into academia and practice. Yet, this dimension continues to be largely unaddressed in schools of social work (Boynton, 2016; Kvarfordt et al., 2018; Moffatt et al., 2021). We contend that it is essential and past due for social work to incorporate spiritual content and pedagogy in field education.

Field educators and supervisors must be aware of the impact of spiritual aspects for both clients and for students, and should be prepared for spiritual reflection, exploration, and dialogue. We will address the importance of attending to students' spiritual needs in the field setting, as students may undergo their own spiritual challenges when they navigate the development of their professional practice identity and the shaping of their own spiritual worldview. The self-reflection and cogitative processes associated with social work education might stimulate spiritual contemplation, distress, or concerns for students, resulting in a need for supervisory support from field supervisors and instructors.

Introducing the Authors' Experience with Spirituality: Emma, Jill, and Heather

Emma

Growing up in evangelical Christianity, I was exposed to messages of service grounded in divine love and self-sacrifice. A vocation of service was compelling to me, and when I began studying social work, it felt like home. But as I dove into my first field placement, the spiritual disquietude that had begun in my teenage years only grew. Encountering individuals

of all belief systems exposed me to the beauty of humanity and challenged the notions of inherent sinfulness I was raised to believe in. The focus on continued self-reflection in my courses, while edifying, contributed to my ongoing destabilization. My first field placement was at a Christian-affiliated food bank and “street church”; it felt familiar and yet entirely foreign after the tectonic shifts I had been experiencing in my worldview. I did not know where to land, how to be, or where I was going. And I certainly did not talk about it.

My own spiritual distress story may be resonant for some readers, as it is common for young people to question their worldviews. But these stories should not be chalked up to a phase, and they are not unique to emerging adults. Spiritual struggles can have profound and lasting adverse mental health impacts and affect individuals of all life stages, backgrounds, and social locations (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Ano & Pargament, 2013; Wilt et al., 2021). My own story is intimately interwoven with my social work education and field practicum experiences. Through my master’s thesis, these experiences help me to explore spiritual struggles in the hopes of improving support of both clients and social work students who encounter these concerns.

Jill

Being raised as an atheist in a home where spirituality was little discussed, I did not begin to explore this topic until I was an adult. Social work was one of the main factors that prompted me to consider spirituality more deeply, because it made me reflect upon my own values and motivations that brought me to the field, as well as grapple with the moral and existential issues that arose during the process. Additionally, I found that spirituality was a dimension that came up continually with many of my clients, and I felt little equipped to address it in my work with them in a competent and ethical matter. I came to believe that this was a major gap not only in my own practice, but also in the profession. Social work curriculum and field education are key components to addressing this gap.

Heather

I was raised by Catholic and Protestant parents who had turned away from their respective churches due to existential and religious questions, which were not answered by their faith. My parents conveyed that I could

determine my own spiritual perspectives and practices. This led me to being exposed to many faiths, through my peers, while growing up in a multi-cultural neighbourhood in Toronto. Growing up, I heard a lot of negativities surrounding religion, although I have come to recognize the great value it holds for many individuals. Having encountered a few distressing spiritual experiences with no one to talk to about them, I blocked my spirituality for about a decade. Through my work with children and families experiencing trauma, grief, and loss I was catapulted back into the spiritual dimension of life. This triggered a renewed journey of understanding my own spirituality. I found that there was little guidance and training in the spiritual dimension, and even a lack of openness to talk about spirituality and religion with supervisors. So, I embarked on a quest to learn as much as I could in the area, which led me to explore spirituality in my master's and PhD programs. I continued this journey after two decades of learning, practice, and research in the area. This pulled me towards the many amazing experiences of my clients. I was also drawn to various organizations: I became involved with the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work, I started attending and chairing conferences and symposiums, and I became the vice-president of the Society. Ultimately, I devoted my research, publishing, and teaching to matters of spirituality.

Defining Spirituality

Spirituality can be difficult to define, as it is highly personal and can vary greatly between groups or individuals (Canda et al., 2019). Within the context of social work, there is a lack of consensus around the definition of spirituality (Barker & Floersch, 2010). Hodge (2018) conveys that there is a trend within the profession to define spirituality in universal terms, with the assumption that everyone is spiritual. Additionally, while this definition is inclusive of a wide variety of spiritual or religious beliefs, the assumption that everyone can identify as being spiritual can decontextualize spirituality and may be too broad in nature. Any definition must be inclusive and respectful of a multitude of spiritual and religious beliefs, but it must also provide enough specificity for practitioners to be able to apply it in their practice (Senreich, 2013). In most definitions, core concepts of spirituality include a search for a sense of connectedness to oneself, others,

the divine, beings beyond human, the natural world, the universe, and the ultimate reality. They also incorporate meaning making and a sense of purpose. Religion, rather, is concerned with spiritual matters and may be defined as institutionalized patterns of values and beliefs shared by a group and (Koenig et al., 2012). For some individuals, spirituality is associated with religion, and for others it is not.

For those individuals who find meaning in the form of religion, this should be reflected in practice. Assessments can explore spiritual and religious strengths, resources, practices, and rituals, as well as areas of challenge and struggle. For support, practitioners can consider collaborating with religious leaders, mentors, or youth groups, among others, and explore church activities for youth (Tangenberg, 2012). Social workers should also engage in an ethical reflexivity and recognize when they might need to refer to a spiritual care practitioner or clergy.

Spirituality and Culture

We contend that understandings of cultural humility and competence should be extended to include a stance on spiritual humility and competence. These should include culturally and contextually appropriate ways of practicing, as spirituality is integral to cultural beliefs and worldviews, particularly for non-Western cultures. For many individuals, spirituality is connected to their culture. Canada is a profoundly diverse country, with people of over 250 ethnic origins reported in the 2016 census (Statistics Canada, 2017a). The proportion of visible minorities is also growing, with 22.3% of the population reporting on the 2016 census to belong to one of these groups (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Canda et al. (2019) stated that the amount of diversity within countries such as the United States and Canada calls for practitioners to take a stance of cultural humility, a perspective that

appreciates complexity and intersectionality of identities, that critically reflects on power and privilege in helping relationships while promoting collaboration and empowerment, that attends to contextual issues of social justice, and that encourages workers' continuous learning through

self-awareness and dialogue with clients and their communities. (p. 23).

We believe that this is true for social workers across the globe.

Scholars have argued for the need of practitioners to use spirituality in their work with migrants and refugees in a collaborative and client-centered manner. However, most social workers are not prepared to do this effectively (George & Ellison, 2015; Hodge, 2019; Whipple et al., 2015). Spirituality can be an important component of the worldview of marginalized peoples, such as Indigenous peoples in colonial nations, and disregarding these ways of knowing can perpetuate further harm (Lavallée & Poole, 2010). Some scholars have argued for incorporating spirituality into the profession in a way that is consistent with the principles of social justice (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Gardner, 2020).

Cultural and spiritual humility and competence involve engagement. It does not mean that a practitioner can become an expert in other cultures, but they can engage in a “never-ending process of living and learning to expand one’s values, knowledge, skills, and relationships” (Canda et al., 2019, p. 400). For this reason, Canda et al. (2019) prefer the term “culturally appropriate practice” over cultural competence because the focus should be on building and maintaining relationships on an ongoing basis with a spiritually sensitive framework, rather than achieving a certain level of skill (p. 400). The clinician develops an awareness of cultural and spiritual aspects for clients, reflects on one’s own spirituality, and continues to grow and develop professionally in relation to spirituality in practice. Danso (2018) noted the controversy and debate among scholars over different terms to describe this aspect of practice. Danso purported that cultural humility does not add more value to social work practice than the pre-existing concept of cultural competence, because cultural humility does not go beyond the principles of anti-oppressive practice. Regardless of which term is used to describe appropriate practice with clients from diverse cultures, spirituality certainly remains a key aspect (Canda et al., 2019).

Spirituality in Social Work

There is a well-established acknowledgment that social work as a profession has many gaps in relation to a holistic or spiritual approach (Carrington, 2013; Zapf, 2008), for it leaves those who wish to take this approach, or encounter spirituality in their practice, to “rely on their own initiative and inventiveness, with no clear theoretical, practical, or ethical guidelines” (Carrington, 2013, p. 288). Many scholars have advocated for the inclusion of spirituality in social work at a broad, macro level (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Crisp, 2020; Gardner, 2020; Zapf, 2008). Boynton (2011) conveyed that the focus on spirituality in social work at this level has centered around social justice (Coates, 2007; Lee & Barret, 2007; Nash & Stewart, 2005), ethics and ethical practice (Canda et al., 2004; Hodge, 2005a), and the need for education and training (Ai, 2002; Baskin, 2002; Coholic, 2003, 2006).

There has also been much discussion of the use of spirituality at the micro level through concepts such as “contemplative spaces” (Jacobs, 2015), mindfulness, gratitude, forgiveness, and radical acceptance, but also through spiritual assessments (Hodge, 2001, 2005b; Seinfeld, 2012). Other studies addressing issues related to practice and teaching have conveyed that spirituality is an essential component of clinical practice (Coates et al., 2007; Groen et al., 2012). Furthermore, some scholars have articulated links between trauma, grief, loss, and spirituality, itself a factor of resilience and posttraumatic growth (Boynton, 2016). They have also outlined the importance of spirituality across the lifespan and paid attention to how individuals engage in spirituality through religious practices, rituals, and creativity (Boynton, 2009, 2014, 2016; Boynton & Vis, 2011, 2017; Crisp, 2016, 2017; Vis & Boynton, 2008).

Researchers have sought the perspectives of practitioners themselves who admitted that, while being generally in favour of the inclusion of spirituality in social work practice, they do not feel equipped to do so because it is rarely included in their social work education or training (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010; Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017; Oxhandler & Giardina, 2017; Oxhandler et al., 2015). A handful of studies with social work practitioners have explored practitioners’ beliefs, feelings, and experiences of incorporating spirituality in clinical practice,

as well as their educational and training experiences, and how their own spirituality influences, or is influenced by, their work (Bell et al., 2005; Canda & Furman, 2010; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014; Sheridan, 2004, 2009). Social work students also think that spirituality should be included in education (Buckey, 2012; Pandya, 2018; Phillips, 2014; Senreich, 2013). A literature review of 493 articles conducted by Buckey (2012) indicated that both students and practitioners report little to no training in this area, and students were very supportive of having this material included in the curriculum.

A survey of 190 Canadian social work educators indicated that they are also largely in favour of incorporating spirituality in practice and education; only one-third of them, though, reported that this kind of material is included in their curriculum, but usually at the instructor's discretion (Kvarfordt et al., 2018). Educators raised some concerns about inserting this content into the curriculum, such as the possibility of bias by faculty or students and the lack of knowledge or experience among faculty in teaching this material (Kvarfordt et al., 2018). Social work practitioners, educators, and students have articulated the importance of spirituality within the field of practice given its significance in the lives and needs of clients, such as in meaning-making processes (Coholic, 2003, 2006; Sheridan, 2004, 2009). Several studies have found that children and adults often bring up spiritual issues in sessions, and that clients want their spiritual beliefs and practices to be recognized, honoured, and included in the counselling process (Boynton, 2016; Canda & Furman, 1998; Coholic, 2003; Sheridan, 2004). It is also apparent that practitioners are addressing and integrating spiritual interventions while lacking critical knowledge and expertise in the area (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014). More importantly, Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) wondered how social workers were gaining knowledge and effectively making sound practice decisions. These limitations raise issues with self-efficacy and competence for social workers, as well as ethical concerns in practice. This body of literature clearly demonstrates an obvious need for social workers to adopt a spiritually sensitive and appropriate practice in their approach; it also underscores that the training and professional development related to spirituality is required not only for students, but for practitioners, field supervisors, and field educators.

Social Work Field Education and Spirituality

Field education is a key component of social work education, as it provides a venue for students to make links with classroom learnings and direct practice experiences. As discussed, the social work classroom rarely includes adequate exploration of spiritual and religious matters, and students may first encounter the spiritual elements of social work when they embark on their field placements and begin engaging with clients. In the field setting, students may encounter spiritual and religious matters in clients' narratives, implicitly or explicitly. Additionally, field experiences may provoke students' own spiritual cogitation, including questioning one's values, ethics, and meaning as they confront the complexities of human suffering, and encounter potential opposition to their own spiritual paradigms.

Social work literature examining field education and spirituality remains limited, and explicitly considers only a few key areas: field education with religiously affiliated agencies, challenges to students' worldviews in field education, and models for integrating spirituality into field supervision and education (see for example: Colvin & Bullock, 2017; Harris et al., 2016; Okundaye et al., 1999). A brief review of the literature revealed that many of these explorations consider Christian student experiences, Christian social service agencies, and perspectives of Christian-affiliated social work schools. This emphasis on Christian perspectives, which demonstrates the prominence of Christianity in Canadian and American religious landscapes, eclipses the true diversity of the spiritual approaches held by clients, students, and practitioners. Okundaye et al.'s (1999) model of spiritually sensitive field supervision is a departure from Christian approaches, and instead integrates Eastern spiritual traditions into field supervision. Exploring non-dominant approaches to spirituality in the field is vital for developing social work's spiritual competency and literacy beyond Christian models.

Although the social work field education and spirituality literature is limited, the possibilities for further connections and explorations are bountiful. Just as social work curriculum must respond to the call for a holistic spiritually-integrated approach, field education must consider its role in supporting the development of spiritually competent and spiritually aware social workers. This involves preparing students for spiritually

sensitive work with clients, but also addressing the importance of the field education team in supporting students' spiritual needs and goals.

Spirituality is an essential element of the human experience and warrants adequate consideration across social work settings. The range of spiritual experiences for human beings can be both deeply nourishing and deeply distressing. In the following section, we explore how, for some clients and students, the spiritual realm can become a site of distress and struggle. Both Emma and Heather have considered these underexamined areas in their respective research on spiritual distress, trauma, grief, and loss in the context of spirituality and aim to provide insights from these realms for field education.

Important Research and Literature for Field Education

Spiritual Struggles, Crises, and Distress

Although there is ample literature confirming the positive impacts of religion and spirituality on coping, burnout prevention, and overall mental health and well-being, a smaller but important body of literature addresses spiritual distress and struggles (Captari et al., 2018; Exline et al., 2000). While social workers and students should consider the potential for wellness, strengths, and resources found in spirituality, a thorough discussion of spirituality must honour its potential "dark side" (Ellison & Lee, 2010, p. 501; de Souza, 2012). Acknowledging the potential harms of religion and spirituality cautions us to avoid idealizing spirituality in social work theorizing, education, and practice: we can recognize that even though "spirituality can be part of the highest of human expressions, it can also be part of the lowest" (Pargament, 2011, p. 129).

Exline and Rose (2005) outline a range of areas that are related to this dark side of spirituality and religion; some include conflicts related to one's spiritual or religious worldview, negative religious or spiritual coping, spiritual struggles and concerns, and spiritual injury. These aspects can cause great internal turmoil for individuals, for while they can impact their mental health and manifest themselves as anger, anxiety, and depression, they may also be related to trauma, grief, and loss (McConnell et al., 2006; Exline & Rose, 2005).

Spiritual struggles or distress are complex and multifaceted experiences that can have profound impacts on our well-being. Spiritual distress may include a troubled relationship with the divine, painful emotions related to one's religion and/or spirituality, chronic doubt, disillusionment with one's religious upbringing, moral and existential concerns, and interpersonal strife in religious settings (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Ellison & Lee, 2010). Although they may be difficult to put into concrete language for the sufferer, these challenges can be defined as "tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, with other people, and within oneself" (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015, p. 565). Pargament (2011), a prominent researcher in the field of spiritual struggle, proposes that if our spirituality, religion, or the organization of our worldview lacks flexibility, fails to respond to the inevitable challenges and confusions of life, and conflicts with our social environment, we may fall into distress. Such struggles are common. Anyone can experience spiritual struggles, as existential disturbances impact many of us throughout our lives regardless of explicit affiliation with a belief system or religion (Preston & Shin, 2017).

There is strong empirical evidence demonstrating linkages between spiritual struggles and distress on the one hand, and adverse mental and physical health outcomes on the other. Anger and shaken faith can result in confusion, and spiritual strife can lead to depression, anxiety, suicidality, poor recovery from illness, and even higher mortality rates (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Exline & Rose, 2005; Wilt et al., 2021). In addition, research is increasingly demonstrating that spiritual distress warrants targeted attention as a distinct and complex phenomenon that "cannot merely be reduced to other psychosocial experiences" (Ano & Pargament, 2013, p. 431; Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Wilt et al., 2021). The spiritual aspect of struggle may be the most grievous factor in decreased well-being and, therefore, calls for a nuanced response from social workers and educators supporting clients and students with these experiences (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015).

Spiritual struggles, distress, and concerns can be precipitated by many factors: trauma, grief, and loss events, mental health challenges, conflicts within one's spiritual community, isolation, existential meaning-making processes, lack of a sense of purpose, personal and professional identity

formation aspects, the discovery of differing ideologies, questions related to religious teachings, illness or injury, etc. These varied experiences of spiritual struggles and distress may be a part of many of our stories, whether we are a client, student, or practitioner; like other emotionally fraught areas, they benefit from being named, illuminated, and nurtured. Reframing personal mental health concerns as spiritual and/or religious struggles or distress can be empowering for individuals and is more holistic than a biological or psychological perspective. Externalizing the root cause of suffering can offer a sense of relief and allow the individual to cope and make meaning of the pain, while understanding that a higher purpose of the struggle may also facilitate spiritual growth (Hefti, 2011). Exline and Rose (2005) claimed that neglecting spiritual struggles and “problems of suffering might cause us to overlook vital sources of spiritual transformation and development” (p. 335). As our spirituality and/or religion can provide the meaning system through which we find an anchor in daily events and major life hurdles, inner anguish about the spiritual realm can “deprive us of a valuable personal resource” and a coherent foundation to stand upon (Ellison & Lee, 2010, p. 505). Therefore, social workers are required to know and understand the potential for deeper spiritual aspects related to clients’ and students’ concerns, and the imperative need to attend to spiritual struggles for effective field practice and education.

Trauma, Grief, and Loss

Spiritual concerns, struggles, questions, and distress often arise through the experience of a traumatic event or from a significant loss. Individuals often ruminate on spiritual aspects in the process of meaning making of these difficult experiences. Pargament et al. (2014) contended that spirituality plays a critical role in major life traumas, as it helps in understanding, managing, and resolving them. Traumatic experiences can result in an existential injury affecting one’s spiritual foundation and worldview, and one’s sense of being in the world (Boynnton & Vis, 2017; Thompson & Walsh, 2010).

Practitioners and social work students will inevitably encounter individuals dealing with trauma who may require spiritual support. However, even though “social workers are often trained in evidence-based trauma interventions and frameworks, spirituality is rarely discussed as part

of these intervention frameworks” (Boynton & Vis, 2017, p. 193). The American Council on Social Work Education (2012) disseminated a competency framework for advanced social work practice which specifically outlines the need for skills and knowledge pertaining to trauma. These guidelines inform how spirituality is interrelated with trauma, and state that spirituality influences the therapeutic relationship and practitioners need to attend to spiritual development in trauma practice. Yet, in reviewing the social work literature, it becomes very apparent that there continues to be a lack of theoretical frameworks, practice guidelines, and evidence-based practices pertaining to spirituality and social work practice across the lifespan.

Incorporating spirituality is a necessary approach to trauma treatment at all developmental stages of life and may be most important for children and adolescents. Well over a decade ago calls were made to include content on spirituality for children and adolescents in social work programs, as this area was viewed to be an important practice concern (Graham et al., 2007; Cheon & Canda, 2010). Yet the gap remains. A continually growing body of research indicates that religion and spirituality is important in the lives of children and adolescents, and it is a critical component in many areas of child and adolescent development and well-being (Boynton, 2016). It also may be supportive or a factor of struggle for those who are homeless, displaced, or living in foster care; those experiencing poverty, violence, various forms of abuse, or sexual minority discrimination; and those engaging in crime or having suicidal ideation (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018).

Research with children has found that trauma, grief, and loss can create spiritual, existential, and metaphysical challenges or struggles, which children are often managing alone (Boynton, 2016; Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Hooyman & Kramer, 2021; Poyser, 2004). Boynton (2016) found that parents may not be aware of the extent of their children’s spiritual struggles or spiritual thoughts and beliefs, and if parents themselves are struggling with these challenges, they are not able to attend to their children’s needs. Furthermore, she found that practitioners reported issues with competency and mastery related to a lack of training and development in this area. These significant practice concerns expressed by social workers are relevant for supporting and fostering the development of emerging social work professionals in the field.

In an attempt to address the gap regarding children's spirituality in counselling, Boynton and Mellan (2021) proposed a framework that incorporates children's perspectives, research, and theory. Four components of their framework focused on creating space for the spiritual dimension, which can be achieved by understanding and adopting a spiritual holistic approach; four other components address how counsellors can integrate spirituality and support children through trauma, grief, and loss. These authors asserted that through suspending judgement and expecting the unexpected, social workers can "more fully embrace what emerges in the co-creative process related to the spiritual dimension" in their work with children (Boynton & Mellan, 2021, p. 2). However, there is much more research and theory to be developed in this critical area of spirituality in trauma, grief, and loss across the lifespan.

Social Work Students and Vulnerability to Spiritual Struggle

Students themselves may experience spiritual challenges throughout their social work education and field placements. Bryant and Astin (2008) discovered that spiritual struggles impact a significant population of university students compared to the general public, which may put them at higher risk for mental health challenges related to spiritual struggles. They found that students from minority religions, students who identify as women, 2SLGBTQ+, and students who encounter disorienting and challenging worldviews during their studies may be particularly vulnerable to spiritual concerns caused by marginalization. Social workers must critically examine the intersections of race, class, and gender in their work, and it can be argued that religious and spiritual identity is a key intersection that warrants further attention and appreciation (Weber, 2015). We contend that for social work students of all social locations, the unique demands of a highly self-reflective, values-based, and experiential program can certainly result in spiritual contemplation, evaluation of one's spiritual worldview, and even spiritual distress (Larkin, 2010).

Gelman (2004) reported that MSW foundation students entering their first practicum experience significant anxiety, which may include fears of inflicting harm on clients, incompetence, and inadequacy. A variety of fears can have an existential and spiritual quality, as they point to deeper concerns regarding one's personal suitability and capacity for practice,

one's morality and ethics, and one's purpose and impact in the world. During their education and placements, students may confront profound questions regarding the purpose of their work and their own values and paradigms (Larkin, 2010). Working with clients who challenge one's worldview can be both disorienting and overwhelming. Additionally, as students confront the trauma experiences of clients, they may face spiritual and existential questions and emotional overwhelm. Students' own trauma histories may reemerge as they enter potentially distressing field placement settings, contributing to spiritual challenges and distress. There is some evidence that social work students have higher rates of personal trauma than students from other disciplines, an observation of certain relevance for field educators supporting students (Black et al., 1993; Sellers & Hunter, 2005). Furthermore, as new practitioners who are still developing coping strategies, social work students in field placements may be at an increased risk of emotional exhaustion and burnout, which can further precipitate or exacerbate spiritual rumination and struggle (Knight, 2010; Ying, 2008). The potentially stressful, traumatic, and spiritually impactful nature of practicum requires not only a trauma-informed approach from field educators, but also a spiritually sensitive approach. While field education can be an empowering and fruitful learning experience, the challenges and existential and spiritual quandaries that can arise cannot be minimized or ignored.

Some scholarship explores the importance of spiritual crises for growth (Magolda, 2008; Parks, 2000). Fowler's (1981) Faith Development Theory provides a helpful lens for contextualizing our spiritual development through six stages. Perhaps of most relevance among these various stages is the individuative-reflective stage. The individuative-reflective stage may occur in early adulthood, resulting in critical analysis of one's values and worldview. Spiritual distress may emerge through this experience. Magolda's (2008) work on student development describes the "shadow lands," a place where students experience ambiguity and fear as they attempt to unpack and rebuild their beliefs in a new context (p. 280). When students surface from the shadow lands, they carry clarity, confidence, and a deeper sense of personal ownership for their lives. Proponents of a growth-through-crisis approach assert that spiritual crises can have meaningful outcomes if individuals have a space or "hearth" to openly

explore their struggles and integrate their new understanding of the world (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 6). In embracing spiritually sensitive practice, field educators and supervisors can be supporters in the shadow land and offer this hearth to students.

Case Examples

Implications for a Spiritually Sensitive Framework for Field Education

We have presented many areas of consideration for field education and practice regarding the spiritual dimension of our work. Although there are many areas of implication, the most critical is in education. It is time

Table 15.1: Case Example #1: Jon (Client)

Jon, a 17-year-old adolescent male, had been feeling depressed and anxious for a few years. He had been bullied at school and had experienced some losses of extended family members. He had been seen by a psychiatrist who recommended an antidepressant; yet Jon did not want to take medications. When the social worker met with Jon, she explored his spirituality as part of the assessment. Jon related that he was an atheist and really did not feel he was spiritual. However, through further questions Jon revealed that he was experiencing existential angst related to attempting to understand the universe and its creation, the meaning and purpose of life, and some of the traumatic experiences in his life. Through dialogue he revealed that these thoughts were overwhelming him, and that he had not discussed these with anyone. He felt he could not make sense of who he was, why he was here, and what it all meant. The social worker was able to facilitate meaning making through framing his depression and anxiety as related to spiritual distress. This allowed Jon to remove the feelings of him being flawed in some way, while it offered an avenue for working with the social worker to address his spiritual distress and anxiety. Through the opportunity to engage in discussion, Jon recognized the questions and struggles he was experiencing were part of our common humanity. The social worker validated his experience, which supported Jon in making sense of his own experiences and to come to terms with not knowing some answers. Through this, Jon was able to focus on other areas of his life that could bring meaning and purpose for him. He found that his depression and anxiety significantly lessened through engaging in spiritual meaning making processes, and by having a place of safety, authentic listening, and reflection provided by the social worker.

Table 15.2: Case Example #2: Gina (Student)

Gina is in her third month of her first BSW practicum at a child welfare organization. She was raised in a Christian home, but no longer attends church and considers herself more spiritual than religious. As part of her practicum duties, Gina calls clients to set up appointments with their social workers. Recently, a client became very aggravated during one of these phone calls and expressed this frustration strongly with Gina, as she did not have ready answers to some of their questions. Gina, suddenly overwhelmed with guilt and confusion, tried to comfort the individual, but the client only became increasingly upset and yelled at Gina until they hung up. When she went home that evening, Gina planned to do “self-care” as discussed in her learning agreement, as she was very upset and confused after the call. Her self-care involved going for a walk and taking a long bath. When Gina returned to practicum the next day, she was still distraught and wracked with a sense of guilt. Her supervisor had been in court with a client the previous day but planned a debrief with Gina for the morning.

In their supervision and debrief meeting, Gina recounted the interaction with the client, and how upsetting the situation was for both parties. Her supervisor began a conversation about what the client may have been feeling. Gina and the supervisor explored how fear and grief were present under the anger the client expressed. They discussed potential strategies for validating and responding to anger. Following this discussion, the supervisor validated Gina’s support of the client, but suggested that in the future if a client continues to yell and get increasingly upset, Gina could tell the client it might be better if they speak again when the client feels calmer and end the conversation. Her supervisor also asked Gina about her guilt response during the interaction. Gina shared that she felt frozen in the situation and saw it as her duty to support the client selflessly. She noted that she must have said something to upset the client, and that it was her role to continue listening and supporting regardless of their response. The supervisor inquired where these beliefs originated from, and Gina noted that selflessness and service were always emphasized and praised in her Christian upbringing, although she had not originally made the connection between her background and her response to the client’s distress. Gina began to consider her religious and spiritual framework’s influence on her behaviour, including both the benefits and drawbacks of her upbringing. This allowed for a conversation about Gina’s values. The supervisor affirmed and validated Gina’s values and inquired about caring for oneself during and following challenging practice experiences.

Through this dialogue, Gina realized that to embody the values of service she held, she needed to care for her own spirit as well. They discussed the challenge of

Table 15.2: *(continued)*

balancing compassionate awareness of a client's distress with awareness of personal boundaries. Gina noted that the language of boundaries felt foreign and overly clinical. She noted that she preferred to think of it as attending to the client's spirit and needs while balancing care for her own spirit and experience. Gina and her supervisor discussed how difficult it can be to navigate this in a way that is respectful of everyone involved, and how this is an ongoing process. Her supervisor discussed what spiritual self-care could look like for Gina beyond the more surface-level self-care practices she had been practicing. They worked together to find a resonant mantra for Gina that she could repeat when she was in situations where she felt frozen and disconnected from herself. Gina chose the mantra "Protecting my spirit matters, too." Together, Gina and her supervisor created a plan to reach out to the client again in order to have a follow-up discussion about what was going on, and how Gina could support him.

Table 15.3: Case Example #3: Lyndsey (Practitioner/Supervisor)

Lyndsey, a school social worker, was assigned to work with a 12-year-old boy named Jason in a small room across the hall from his classroom. Jason had been quite aggressive and engaging in disruptive behaviours and refusing to do schoolwork. He had been exposed to domestic violence, was beaten on several occasions by his father who was struggling with substance use and mental health. He was living with his mother and a 16-year-old female sibling in a small rural town. The social worker was asked to teach the youth coping strategies and to slowly reintroduce academics in his day. The social worker had begun to develop a trusting relationship with the youth and was engaging in teaching and practicing coping strategies. She had provided the boy with a worksheet on thinking about coping at different life stages. Upon reading his responses to questions, she noted he had written that teenagers cope by "killing themselves." She was concerned about this and made her supervisor and the case manager aware of this, and she also let the boy's mother know.

The following week she was attending a psychiatric appointment for the youth and, while waiting for the family, she was notified that Jason was in hospital and had attempted suicide and was calling out for her during the night. This sparked spiritual thoughts for Lyndsey around life, death, suicide, meaning, and purpose. She recognized that she had made a significant therapeutic connection with Jason, and that he felt safe in her presence. She was supposed to attend a case conference for another

Table 15.3: *(continued)*

youth right after this. She informed her supervisor of the events and was asked if she needed a couple of minutes. Lyndsey was in shock and in spiritual turmoil, and all she could respond was that she needed some water, which her supervisor got for her and then motioned for her to go into the case conference.

Lyndsey struggled to focus while in the conference and returned to the school where a colleague asked her what was wrong. He told her that she needed some spiritual self-care and should go home. She took his advice, although she later learned that he received a reprimand from the supervisor for doing this. The supervisor did not speak to Lyndsey for over a week and expected Lyndsey to return to the small room to work with the boy. Her supervisor later related that she felt that maybe Lyndsey needed some space, which is why she did not call her or arrange for supervision. This was a missed opportunity to support Lyndsey and attend to the spiritual distress triggered by the work and the traumatic events.

Lyndsey struggled for some time, felt exhausted, and burned out. However, through talking with a few peers and engaging in her own spiritual self-care spiritual reflection, she was able to continue working. She also was able to talk to the youth and the parent about the event, to support the family in connecting at a deeper authentic level, and to assist the parent to be aware of the child's experience and need at times for co-regulation and spiritual reflection on his experiences of trauma. She moved from working on coping and anger management skills to addressing the spiritual aspects of care and the need for processing and meaning making of the traumatic experiences. She also inquired about the spiritual strengths of the family and facilitated spiritual activities and rituals they could engage in to bring comfort and healing. This attention to spirituality enhanced her practice from both a personal and professional level.

now to orient ourselves to openly attend the spiritual domain and offer education and support within the practice realm.

Our ethical standards of practice, in particular competence, social justice, and client self-determination, apply to the relevance of spirituality for social work practice (CASW, 2005). Educators may choose to use ethical guidelines developed by scholars such as Canda and Furman (2019). A key starting point is education and training on spiritual matters for field instructors. Ensuring that future social workers who will become field instructors have spiritually sensitive practice skills, knowledge, and attitudes, in addition to a willingness to create change in policies and

practices and develop spiritually informed treatment approaches, is of utmost importance. Social workers need to be cognizant of the spiritual dimension as it relates to theories such as humanistic and existential theories, transpersonal theory, and person in environment, or, as Zapf (2008) argued, person-as-environment as we are part of a larger environment of creation. Social workers should be educated on conducting spiritual assessments and the use of various models and approaches to assess for spiritual strengths, activities, practices, and resources, as well as challenges and struggles. Spirituality can readily be infused in treatment processes and frameworks, and considerations for further development in this area of practice are needed. Additionally, with appreciation for the range of cultural and religious identities clients and students may bring, spiritual pedagogy must include content on world religions, traditions, and faiths, as well as the impact of religious discrimination. Furthermore, an awareness of the roles that trauma, loss, and grief play in sparking and catapulting spiritual thoughts and reliance on spiritual beliefs and practices will inform a spiritually appropriate and competent practice (Boynton, 2016).

Field educators' roles will include preparing students for spiritually competent practice, while remaining aware of students' own spirituality, struggles, and strengths. This includes open discussion about the ethical challenges of engaging spirituality in practice and supporting spirituality in the daily life of the student. To assist students through spiritual challenges and provide a "hearth" environment, the field instructor-student relationship is critical. These matters are often deeply personal and at times ineffable. We invite supervisors and field educators to move beyond administrative and managerial approaches to supervision and be willing to enter into dialogues about spiritual, existential, and moral matters. While students are often encouraged to self-reflect during their social work training, field instructors' and educators' own self-reflection and willingness are vital for spiritual dialogue. We do not need to be experts in spiritual competency to embrace the mystery and step into dialogues on spiritual and existential matters. Incorporating spiritual awareness in practice is a lifelong learning process.

While spiritual pedagogy needs to be infused in social work program learning outcomes and standards of practice, research and development of best practices is required; in addition, there ought to be explicit attention

given to spirituality in ethics, accreditation standards of schools, and organizations. Social workers should advocate for policy, practices, and procedures to include spirituality and follow holistic approaches.

Conclusion

Though spirituality has been largely neglected in the social work field and profession, spiritual issues abound for clients and students alike. Rather than avoiding these realities, social work needs to tackle such issues head on. We, as social workers, need to pull our heads out of the proverbial sand and acknowledge that this is a crucial area of practice that we must be ready to address. Spiritual struggles and distress are one area of spiritual experience that social workers may confront within themselves or with their clients. It is important for field educators to be aware that students may be particularly vulnerable to spiritual struggles, and that social work education and practicum experiences can spur on spiritual contemplation and cogitation.

We require a willingness and processes in field education to build awareness and meaningful responses to students' spiritual needs during this major transition period. Spiritual distress can emerge from trauma, grief, and loss, as well as through our development as humans when our worldviews are challenged. Both clients and students, as well as seasoned professionals, will at times face challenges to their spiritual paradigms. We recognize that there is a reciprocal nature of practice driving research and research driving practice, and thus it was our aim to impart some of the key research and practice implications related to the historically suppressed, yet emergent context of spirituality for clients, students, supervisors, and educators in field education. We hope that social workers will find supportive ways to attend to the spiritual component for clients and students and find innovative ways to integrate spirituality into their daily practice. We also hope that these aspects will drive groundbreaking research questions and support professional knowledge in this dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted area of field education.

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