

6-2019

Social Work Students' View on the Integration of Religion in Social Work

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SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S VIEWS ON THE
INTEGRATION OF RELIGION IN SOCIAL WORK

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Araceli Delgado

June 2019

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on social work students' views on the integration of religion in social work. This study allowed students to gain knowledge and insight on the importance of discussing religion with clients. The study examined social worker students' experiences during their involvement in the social work program which looked into how prepared they were in situations where religion was necessary to discuss with clients and other outcomes.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with ten participants who discussed their experiences in internships during their involvement within the social work program. Participants were in different years in the BASW and MSW program and were from various ethnicity, age, gender, and specializations. Main findings were that participants believed religion plays a huge role in clients' everyday lives and that the social work program is not teaching students how to discuss religion with clients during their internships. Another finding was that a few social work students were not prepared to discuss clients' religious practices. Agency employers also discouraged social work students from discussing clients' religious practice.

This study enhances the social work profession and allow social workers to better service diverse and cultural clients by highlighting the importance of religion in some clients' lives. The social work profession can improve the quality of service that is given to clients that have a religious practice and can be

assessed for appropriate services based on their individual needs. Social work students can learn to integrate this topic into their assessments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for giving me strength and allowing me to write this research project and for being my biggest supporter. Now, I would like to write something for my parents. Antes que todo, quiero agradecerles por todo el apoyo que me han brindado. Ustedes son mis más grandes tesoros y la decisión por cual escojí continuar mi educación. Palabras no expresan lo dichosa que soy al tener unos padres como ustedes. Mil gracias por invertir en mí y por siempre asegurando que estuviera bien. Los quiero mom and dad.

Secondly, I would like to thank my huge family for their continuous support throughout this journey. Most importantly, for being my “self-care” and making me laugh and smile. For all those nights that we played Lotería and sang karaoke. Thank you for making stressed and overwhelming days bearable.

I would like to express my appreciation to all my professors in my undergrad and graduate years at California State University of San Bernardino. A special thanks to my field liaison, Marlene Evans, who always had encouraging words for me and to my research advisor, Dr. James Simon, for his support and feedback.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The first School of Social Work was founded in 1904. Since then there has been a growing number of institutions that provide bachelor's and master's to students interested in the social work profession. Schools of Social Work offer an extensive curriculum of courses which include; human behavior, policy, community, advocacy, research methods, micro and macro practice all with an emphasis on working with diverse clients.

These courses prepare students for the social work profession by teaching them to advocate on behalf of their clients and work with families of diverse backgrounds and situations. The diversity of families include their ethnicity, culture, norms, language, traditions, religious practice, and other factors that social workers must evaluate from each family. Students are taught to meet the clients where they're at by conducting assessments and using other tools that will help them learn more about their clients. However, to this date, students are typically not given a specific course in the school of social work that teaches them how to discuss religion with their clients. Religion is a part of a person's identity and it can act as an influencer in the decisions they make. Religion is important to talk about with clients who practice because it can help social workers conduct a powerful intervention, set goals with clients, offer specific services, and most importantly establish rapport with clients.

Problem Statement

“For about half of the 20th century, social work moved away from the inclusion of RS [religious spirituality] in social work practice and education, with no research to support its integration” (Canda & Furman, 2010). There continues to be a lack of attention paid to religious practice in the social work profession. Schools of social work do not include a course in the curriculum that teaches social work students about religious practice that may be included in clients. In a study conducted in Virginia in 1992, social workers, psychologists, and professional counselors were surveyed on their opinions about the inclusion of religious/spiritual issues in education and training. Of the 328 participants, 79% reported that content related to religious or spiritual issues was rarely or never presented in school (Sheridan et al., 1992). Another study conducted in Britain in 2003 & 2004 (Gilligan & Furness, 2005), surveyed 88 social workers and 39 social work students on their views on the appropriateness of using religious or spiritual interventions with service users and the relevance of the social work curriculum to these issues. British social workers were asked if they have utilized religious interventions and found them appropriate. Interventions included in the survey were; gathered information on client’s religious or spiritual backgrounds, used religious or spiritual language or concepts, recommended participation in a religious or spiritual programme, referred clients to religious or spiritual counselors, prayed or mediated with a client, helped clients to clarify their

religious or spiritual values, etc. Statistics showed lower percentages on the utilization of these interventions and higher in the appropriateness factor.

Furthermore, student's perception about the extent to which their professional training covered religion and spirituality revealed that 41 percent of the sample believed that these topics had, thus far, been covered 'Rarely' and 38.5 percent 'Sometimes'; 20.5 percent thought that they had 'Never' been covered and no students thought they had been covered 'Often'. Statistics shown supported the need for students to be offered a specialized course in religion and spirituality in part of their training. In 2015, Oxhandler et al. (2015) conducted a national survey of 442 LCSW'S across the U.S only 246 participants answered the questions asking if they had prior education on religious practice, 13% of LCSW's reportedly took a graduate course on religious and spirituality practice, and 26% received some content in their field education (Oxandler et al., 2015). These studies showed the desire of social work students wanting to be given a course that encompasses religion and the lack of training they acquired. Discussing client's religious practice can be beneficial to social workers for multiple reasons. First, it can help clients open up and build rapport with their social worker. Secondly, clients can share their personal beliefs which allows social workers to arrange powerful interventions specific to client's religious needs. Third, social workers can refer services and resources that can support their religious practice. However, institutions have yet to include a course that will

teach social work students how to integrate their client's religion and the benefits of doing so.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore student's views on the integration of religion in social work practice. This study was one of the few qualitative studies addressing this issue and it will bring awareness to the importance of students receiving knowledge on discussing clients' religion. The study aimed to benefit clients, future social work students, schools of social work, and the social work profession.

This study served to enhance social work practice by providing better service to religious clients. It discussed why religion is important to address and included student's personal beliefs and conclusions based on their responses. The study measured how comfortable students feel talking about religion and if they believed the School of Social Work program should include a course that teaches students how to discuss client's religiosity. This study explored students' views on the integration of religion by asking social work students if they feel it's important to acknowledge clients' religion and if they felt prepared to do so.

Significance of the Project

Schools of social work need awareness regarding the significance of how students must learn to work with religious clients. Social workers often overlook

or avoid talking about their clients' religion because they are not well prepared to discuss their clients' religion. Oxhandler et al. (2017), suggested social work education programs should consider offering a course on religion in their curriculum, with a focus of being aware of the practitioner's religious and spiritual beliefs, the role these beliefs play in the therapeutic relationship, and how to set appropriate boundaries after they conducted a national quantitative study which surveyed LCSW's. The study found LCSW's were not prepared to talk about their client's religion or wouldn't discuss it if clients didn't bring up first. Students may encounter similar situations and to avoid this type of situations, schools of social work can start incorporating courses that will teach students to be prepared to discuss religion with clients.

Hypothesis

The exploration of this study allowed the possibility for the implementation of new courses in the social work education. The proposed study answered the following research questions:

1. What are social work student's views on the integration of religion in social work?
2. Are social work students prepared to discuss clients' religious practice?
3. Do social work students' know how to discuss clients' religious practice?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study focused on social works students' views on the integration of religion in social work. The literature review includes a brief history on religion, religious affiliation, understanding the influence of religion, and religious justification of abuse. This section also explains conflicting findings and theories that have guided past research. The theory guiding this study was social learning theory.

History of Religion

Religion has been a symbolic influence for centuries. Religion (from the Latin *Religio*), meaning 'restraint' or to 'show respect for what is sacred', is an organized system of beliefs and practices revolving around, or leading to, a transcendent spiritual experience (Mark, 2018). Religion has existed since ancient times in Egypt and Greece with the first existing gods and goddesses. The gods would repay humans for their service by taking care of their daily needs in life. People then and now are concerned for their place in the world, life after death, eternity, and suffering in this world (Mark, 2018). Religion was and is an influence on many people that believe good will come to them if they follow a religious practice. These beliefs were the start of a symbolic meaning to people's lives and how religion is practiced today. Religion is practiced in different ways

with different beliefs. American society has become more religiously diverse; Americans have become more accepting of religious diversity and more appreciative of religions other than their own (Chaves, 2011). In other words, people practice other religions instead of their own if those beliefs align better with their personal beliefs. Religion is being practiced from people with different ethnic backgrounds and cultures with no limitations as to who can practice or pertain to a specific religion.

Religious Affiliation

In 2016, findings from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) American Values Atlas, the single largest survey of American religious and denominational identity, sampled more than 101,000 American's from all 50 states. The religious landscape showed 17% being White evangelical Protestant, 13% White mainline Protestant, 11% White Catholic, 8% Black Protestant, 7% Hispanic Catholic, 4% Hispanic Protestant, 2% Mormon, 2% other nonwhite Catholic, 2% Jewish, 1% Jehovah's Witness, 1% Muslim, 1% Hindu, 1% Orthodox Christian, 1% other religion, 3% didn't know or refused to answer, and 24% didn't affiliate with a religion (Cox & Jones, 2016). More than 70% of Americans affiliate themselves with a religion. These statistics shows religion is a major influence in the U.S. This provides support for the importance of the role of religion in many people's lives.

Existing Barriers Discussing Religion in Social Work

It is not common for social workers working for counties to receive a specific training that encompasses how to discuss client's religion during assessments. It can be argued that the educational institutions they attended needed to provide a religious affiliation training. Nevertheless, social workers are not prepared to ask about a client's religious practice nor are they bringing it up. Although social workers are expected to understand religion as part of the code of ethics, it is not nearly the same as knowing how to appropriately apply it in practice. In order to get to know clients, social workers must make a global assessment which includes asking their clients about their religiosity and spirituality. If social workers do not conduct such assessment, they can be missing valuable information from the client's being. However, if social work students are trained on this topic, it can prepare them to serve clients better by meeting their client's individual needs.

Understanding the Influence of Religion

The importance of understanding religion can be complicated but beneficial in many ways. First, there must be an understanding to why people choose to practice a religion. Some people that practice Catholicism believe that god(s) will take care of their needs and/or that they will experience good karma in their lives if they follow the sacraments. Furthermore, there are numerous reasons that influence people to have a religious practice. It has been studied

that when people encounter personal problems in their life, they often reach out to religious leaders and faith-based communities for advice rather than professional service providers (Kane & Jacobs, 2013). People use religion as a support network to ask religious leaders and/or church members for advice instead of professionals. This creates an issue with the clients' comfort level.

Religion plays a major influence in the important decisions people make in their everyday lives. A quantitative study that was conducted to understand how religion influences individual's decision-making, showed that religious factors shape decisions such as marital, career, where to live, and how many kids to have. The study explains that people who come from conservative religious traditions will be more likely to link religious qualities in their marriage and others choose their jobs based on how much they will contribute to the community. It also explains how religion influences fertility decisions such as abortion or how many children to conceive (Sigalow, Shain, & Bergey, 2012). Another study identified the possible enhancing effects of religion as a semi treatment or life experience that can be helpful. A sample of 5,417 women was selected from the Preparation of Marriage data set. Participants were asked about any sexual abuse history and their religiosity. Emotional, depression, and relationship stability was measured as well. The results showed 653 women reported being sexually abused in their childhood. In addition, abused women said they were depressed and had low level of religiosity. A second analysis that viewed only Catholic sexually abused women (a sample of 577), showed they had issues with

emotional and relationship stability but weren't depressed. Overall, the authors proposed that religious experiences provided these women with both an emotional and cognitive support for dealing with this trauma. The Catholic sexually abused women had established a relationship with god with whom they can pray and gain feelings of acceptance (Doxey, Jensen, & Jensen,1997). The results of this study showed that women who practiced religion were less depressed than women who didn't practice religion.

Religious Justification of Abuse

In 2010, two adoptive parents were accused of 'biblical' child beating their seven-year-old adoptive daughter. The couple used quarter-inch plastic tubing to beat her and told their attorney they had gotten the idea from a fundamentalist Christian book called *Train Up a Child* which promotes different disciplinary methods that claim to train children to be obedient (CBS News, 2010). In 2011, two different adoptive parents were charged with homicide by abuse after their adopted and home-schooled daughter, Hana (13), was found dead. She had died of hypothermia and malnutrition after being forced to sleep out in the barn, deprived of food and whipped across her legs. This couple was also influenced by *Train Up a Child* and used a 15-inch plastic tube on the day she died. The authors of the book encourage parents to use the tube as a version of the 'rod' which is seen in Proverbs 13: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" (National Post, 2011).

These religion-related child abuse cases are a few examples of how religious beliefs and practice can influence individuals to make poor decisions. These individuals strongly believe they are acting out in good faith and God is by their side. Many people would consider these individuals to be psychotic and need mental health services and/or deserve to be arrested, but social workers are trained to believe these individuals can change and deserve a second chance in life. A national survey studied three forms of religion-related child maltreatment: sexual and other abuse from religious authority figures (sexual activities conducted by priests/ministers), medical neglect motivated by caretakers' religious beliefs (using prayer to heal children), and physical abuse perpetrated by adults because of literal interpretations or religious writing (bible verses). Information was gathered from district attorneys, social service departments, and law enforcement agencies which provided a total of 739 religion-related abuse cases. Only 249 cases were selected from this sample that measured the three forms of abuse mentioned above. After the selection of cases, surveys were sent out to specific personnel who were working in these agencies. The study showed that there was a high number of cases that involved child maltreatment, medical neglect, and physical abuse with religion. In most cases, the perpetrators were adults that children knew and trusted. One case involved parents beating their child with the bible to cast the devil out of her (Bottoms, Goodman, Tolou, Diviak, & Shaver, 2015). This type of abuse was justified through religion that could be missed if social workers are not discussing

religion with clients. Social workers should be trained to discuss clients' religiosity to explore if their religious practice and beliefs led to their involvement with Children and Family Services (CFS). Social workers are more than able to work with these families, but they must start by assessing every aspect in the client's life.

Social Workers Fear Religion

Social workers may avoid discussing religion with clients for multiple reasons. A few could be lack of training, lack of knowledge, or fear of offending their clients. Research conducted by a professor at Baylor University showed that licensed clinical social workers (LCSW's) believe that discussing religion can lead to improvements in mental and overall health, but practitioners are not integrating these discussions with their clients. As survey that was taken by LCSW's showed that more than 80 percent of practitioners had a positive attitude regarding the integrations of their client's religion and are in fact comfortable addressing this topic, however, they choose not to do so (Eckert, 2015). Eckert (2015) made suggestions for this happening which included:

- practitioners only discuss this if clients bring it up first
- social work students are not being trained adequately, and
- LCSW's fear that they might not know how to talk about religion with clients (Eckert, 2015).

Theory Guiding Conceptualization

The social learning theory was used for this research study. “Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (Bandura, 1977). This theory supports the idea of clients’ being raised in religion environments and learning how to practice it as adults, which may affect their parenting practices.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This section includes a detailed description of the research methods and procedures that were employed in carrying out this study. Specifically, this section addresses the design of the study, sampling methods used, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and methods for content analysis.

Study Design

This study attempted to explore students' views on the integration of religion. The study addressed the issue of social work students not receiving courses in the School of Social Work on how to integrate clients' religion. The purpose of this study was to explore how comfortable students feel addressing client's religious practice, as well as the importance of addressing clients' religious practice.

The research method used for this study was qualitative design, using an interview guide as the instrument. Participants were asked interview guided questions which consisted of open-ended questions. Demographic questions were asked before the interviewing questions. Information gathered from the interview identified social work students' views on the integration of religion in school of social work. Researcher utilized a recording device to record all

interviews while the researcher also took notes during each individual interview. An informed consent and a debriefing statement were given to all participants as well as a copy of the informed consent upon participants' request. The informed consent included permission to record during the interview. The sampling criteria for this study consisted of 10 social work students. Five participants were BASW students and the other five participants were MSW students.

The rationale for choosing a qualitative research design was for the exploration of this topic which is understudied. This research design seek to represent the complex worlds of respondents viewing all aspects. It views an understanding of all aspects that can only be captured via intensive engagement (Padgett, 2008). Additionally, a qualitative design was the best method to use in this study because it allowed participants to share as much information they desired, and it also allowed the researcher to ask probing questions for clarity.

On the other hand, several limitations applied to using qualitative research design. "Open-ended interviews call for participants to fully express their responses in as much detail as desired, it can be quite difficult for researchers to extract similar themes or codes from the interview transcripts as they would with less open-ended responses" (Turner, 2010). This limitation was addressed by comparing the respondent's answers that are similar and finding the theme that best fits. Another limitation was that the interviewing questions can be misleading, and assumptions can be speculated. The interviewing questions

were carefully worded to avoid personal biases that may gear specific answers from participants.

Sampling

The study utilized a non-probability sampling. Participants for this study were recruited from the School of Social Work department. Criteria for participants were the following; must be a current student pursuing a BASW or MSW. Professors and staff in the Social Work program will be excluded. If participants who volunteer for this study were more than 10, researcher gave each participant a number and utilized a random number generator app to select 10 participants only. The sample consisted of both male and female of varying age, ethnicity, and pursuit of diploma.

There were 10 social work students participating in this study. This sample was chosen due to the study's limited time frame, participants availability, confidentiality, and limited support. Access to interview participants was gained through the department of social work school approval letter and participants consent.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data for this study was collected using interview guide as the instrument. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded with a recording device. There were 6 open-ended questions which allowed

respondents to elaborate on their responses and 6 close-ended questions for a total of 12 questions. The questionnaire was not taken from another study. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher based on literature review to fit the study. Creating a new instrument can be problematic for encoding themes because it has not been tested out before. However, the researcher analyzed all interviews and chose a theme that consisted with most participants' responses. The wording of the questions was formatted to avoid any offense to the participants. This instrument encouraged participants to share their experiences with no limitation to their sharing.

The focus of the instrument was to explore the comfort level of social worker students integrating clients' religious practice and explore students' views on whether a course should be given to incoming social work students that will teach them how to integrate client's religious practice in social work. Researcher printed out 10 interviewing instruments and used note-taking skills to write down participant's responses and other relevant information for the study in the interviewing instruments. Participants were given the opportunity to disclose their personal experiences and beliefs as well as why or why not they believe clients' religious practice should or shouldn't be discussed with clients. Interviews were transcribed using a link that typed the entire recorded interview. Researcher used the interviewing instruments to write down notes and highlight common themes and did so in each participant's transcribed interview. Researcher then created a table to identify common themes and included it in chapter four.

Procedure

Before the beginning of the study, IRB approval was given to the researcher, IRB approval number was SW 1912. Consent was also needed from the School of Social Work department. An email describing the nature of the study, recruitment of participants, and dates study would take place was sent to the director of the Social Work program. Participants were all social worker students in the social work program. Upon receiving consent to interview students for this study, researcher created a sign-up sheet for students to voluntarily sign up along with dates, times, and available space where the interview would take place. Researcher went to one BASW and one MSW class after class to not interrupt class time to ask students if they wished to participate in this study. Researcher reminded students it was not a requirement from the School of Social Work program and their participation was voluntary. Researcher asked for five participants from the BASW class and five from an MSW class and a list went around for participants to select a date and time that best fitted their availability.

Before interviews began, researcher gave a quick introduction and informed participants their identities would remain confidential and recordings and notes used in the study would be trashed after the study was completed. They were also informed that they may remove themselves from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were also reminded their participation was not a school requirement. Once participants understood their participation was

voluntary, each participant was given an informed consent which included a statement that explained the interview would be recorded. Once each participant had signed with an “X”, the recorder would start recording and interviews would begin. After the interviews were conducted, a debriefing statement explaining the purpose of the study and how their information would be utilized was given to each participant.

Participants were not asked for their name, address, telephone number, or any other personal information. They were reminded at the beginning of the study that all information would be kept confidential and erased after the completion of the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

Before the interviewing process, each participant was given a verbal overview of the purpose of the study. Researcher made sure to explain to the participants that any information given would be kept confidential and erased when study was completed. Once participants understood their identities would be kept confidential and still wished to continue, then they were given an informed consent to sign. The informed consent included information regarding a recording device to record interviews as well as a reminder that their participation was voluntary and was not a school requirement. Researcher also reminded participants of their ability to remove themselves from the study at any time without consequence. If participants gave consent to be interviewed but wished

to terminate later, their decision would be respected, and the participants information would be erased for no longer use. Recorded interviews were stored in a safe space under lock and key for participants protection. Participants were offered the opportunity to review the recorded interview to decide what content they wouldn't like to use for the study.

Data Analysis

The data gathered for this study utilized a qualitative design to explore social work students' views on the integration of religion in social work. The study was conducted face-to-face with all participants and each interview was recorded. The recorded interviews were reviewed to identify common themes among the participant's responses using content analysis.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the structure of this study. The sample size consisted of 10 social work students. The study used a qualitative approach to allow participants to share their personal experiences and receive an understanding of their views on the integration of religion. Their input was a major contribution to this study as well as future studies to come.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This section presents data that was collected through faced-to-face interviews with a questionnaire designed for the present study. The questionnaire was designed to explore participants' views, opinions, and perspectives on how the integration of religion in social work is beneficial. The questionnaire contained six demographic questions that provided basic and relevant information of the participants' background. The questionnaire also included six open-ended questions. The questionnaire was conducted through qualitative interviews. Participants' responses were transcribed with the purpose of identifying the following specific themes: religious involvement, self-awareness, lack of preparedness during the school of social work program, competency, and contribution to future leaning.

Presentation and Findings

Demographics

The sample size was ten social work students attending a social work program. Each participant was asked to answer 6 demographic questions which provided information such as ethnicity, age, gender, what program they were in, and their area of specialization. Ethnicity of participants consisted of (1) Multiracial, (2) Caucasian, (2) Biracial and (5) Hispanic. Participants included 1

male and 9 females for a total of 10 participants with an age range from 23 to 52 years old. Four participants were in the Title IV-E program and six participants were non-title IV-E. The Title IV-E program is a stipend program which provides professional education and monetary support to undergraduate and graduate social work students who intend to pursue or continue a career in the field of public child welfare. Five participants were in their first year of the MSW program, two participants were in their first year of the BASW program, and three participants were in their last year of the BASW program. Participants' area of specialization included (1) General/unknown (1) Family violence/Mental health, (2) behavioral health/mental health, (2) elderly/aging population, and (4) child welfare. Participants were asked about their personal views regarding religiosity, the integration of religion in social work practice, training, challenges and barriers, competency, and opinions on future training.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample

	N (%)	M	S.D.
Age		35.4	10.97
Sex			
Male	1 (10%)		
Female	9 (90%)		
Race/Ethnicity			
African-American/Black	0 (0%)		
Caucasian/White	2 (20%)		
Hispanic/Latino	5 (50%)		
Asian/Pacific Islander	0 (0%)		
Other	3 (30%)		
Education			
BASW Title IV-E	0 (0%)		
BASW Non Title IV-E	5 (50%)		
MSW Title IV-E	4 (40%)		
MSW Non Title IV-E	1 (10%)		
BASW 1 st Year	2 (20%)		
BASW 2 nd Year	3 (30%)		
MSW 1 st Year	5 (50%)		
Specialization			
Child Welfare	4 (40%)		
Mental/Behavioral Health	2 (20%)		
Elderly	2 (20%)		
Family Violence	1 (10%)		
General	1 (10%)		

Qualitative Interview Data

After each participant was asked to share their demographics, the researcher interviewed and asked 6 open-ended questions. Each interview varied from 3 minutes to 11 minutes with an average of five minutes per interview. The researcher asked open-ended questions with the purpose of exploring participants' personal views and experiences on the integration of religion in social work practice, training, challenges and barriers, competency, and ideas on future training. From the set of questions that were asked, the themes that emerged were the following: religious involvement, self-awareness, lack of preparedness during the school of social work program, competency, and contribution to future learning.

Table 2: Themes Related to Findings

Themes/Subthemes	Description
Religious Involvement Views	This theme emphasizes the views on what students believe religion means or what it looks like.
Self-Awareness Level of importance Barriers or issues	This theme reflects the student's insight on whether they believe it is important to discuss client's religious practice and what issues they may encounter if they do or don't.
Lack of Preparedness During the School of Social Work Training	This theme acknowledges the lack of training students have experienced within the school of social work program.
Competency Internship	This theme measures how comfortable students feel discussing religion with clients and what experiences they have had during their internships when it was necessary to discuss religious involvement.
Ideas for Future Learning Brainstorming	This theme addresses ideas and recommendations social work students came up with that will help incoming students to start learning about this.

Religious Involvement

Participants were asked: Please tell me about your views on religion? 9 out of 10 participants shared they had personal religious views and all 10 participants agreed that religion was an important aspect in some people's lives. One participant responded:

“It’s very important to a lot of people. It’s a way of coping and it helps you with just focusing on the positive things in life. It’s also a very powerful tool to heal and move forward” (Participant 10, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Furthermore, another participant said:

“Well I think there’s three parts to everybody, mind, body, spirit and so I think religion playing into the spirituality part of you is super important. It should be acknowledged” (Participant 3, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Another participant expressed religion as a resistance for most people.

“I think there’s there’s a lot of judgement attached to different religions, there is a lot of shame attached to different religions and I think it can be a hindrance to people’s true spirituality” (Participant 4, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Self-Awareness

Participants for this study were asked to share their insight on the importance of discussing religion with clients and to disclose of any barriers or issues they saw encountering if they didn’t discuss religion with clients.

Participants for this study agreed that religion can help with case planning and offer support for clients and should be a topic that needs to be discussed if deemed appropriate. One participant elaborated on their experience discussing religion with one of their clients:

“I do a lot of hospice volunteering so all of my clients talk about their religious views and it’s very important to them, especially when they’re at the end of life care, they focus on religion and they focus on like the afterlife...it brings comfort and closure” (Participant 10).

Furthermore, another participant explained that religion can influence the actions people make on their everyday lives:

“Religion is tied to decisions they made and how they operate in life. Religion is a huge component for a lot of people and it drives them whether they are aware of it or not. I think because it’s an integral part of everyone’s history” (Participant 4).

In addition, participants also stated that it is important to discuss client’s religious practice as it can offer additional support and can be implemented in their case plan:

“I think it’s important because as part of the assessment process [in social work practice] is to include, spirituality and so it could be a big support system for them that if we never tap into it, we're never going to know that they have that kind of support system there to help them through whatever time that they're going through... For example, with my own family, they are my support system, but there's a lot of things that I would never go to my family about just because they don't understand. And for me I would go to my church. I have people at my church who I consider an additional support system for me that I could go to them to talk about things. Like if I

were to have counseling, I wouldn't go to just go to anyone. I would go to probably someone at my church and get counseling. With clients, if we're referring them to counseling per say and they have someone in their church that they would like to receive counseling from, I don't think that that's something that should be restrained from them just because you don't include it in the practice. I think that if that's a resource that's going to help them grow and become better than it should be included"

(Participant 1, qualitative interview, February 2019).

In addition to this answer, participant 1 elaborated more on the barriers that social workers can encounter if clients' religious practice is not considered:

"A part of creating the service (case) plan is you're including the client's perspective and so by not including their spiritual aspect or their religion, you're not being inclusive of who they are as a person and you kind of disregard that part of them" (Participant 1).

On the other hand, half of the participants stated it could vary on the person as many clients may not be religious, could possibly get offended, or don't need to be asked about their religious practice in order to help them:

"I personally think that it can vary person to person. Everybody's different. I don't think it can have a problem if we don't discuss religion. Depending on the person. If they don't have strong religious beliefs, I don't think it won't do any harm. I feel that with the clients that do have a strong religious belief, they might feel that it kind of needs to be brought

up. And the fact that we are not, it's like a taboo, in the MSW, I feel like we are kind of prohibited to talk about or religions with clients so it can affect the way we really want to serve our clients and I feel like we're not giving our full potential in helping them that can affect them negatively”

(Participant 2, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Another participant acknowledged the importance of acknowledging client’s religious practice as stated:

“If we don’t discuss religion and it’s something that they actually need and it is a part of their process for healing or moving towards their goal, then we might be missing a big aspect of their life that we don’t really see or we might not understand that it is actually helping them or we might see progress on one of their goals. We are not going to get their full picture of their lives if we don’t get that aspect of it” (Participant 3, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Lack of Preparedness During the School of Social Work

All participants in this study agreed that during their involvement in the school of social work program, they had received minimal training or lectures regarding religiosity. All participants agreed this is a training or lecture they would like to take within the school of social work program in classroom settings or through their internships:

“I am a Christian, and I would like to learn how ask questions and not seem bias. You might have [other religions] like Hindu or Muslim so

having a way to bring up their religion where its more acceptable and it doesn't seem bias would be cool...my area of focus is child welfare so I think [the training] should be implemented in county practice for sure” (Participant 1).

Another participant added:

“I know its something that I know can be important to talk about and ways to talk to somebody about it...someone who has been working for the agency for a while or has had experience talking to clients about religion should provide the training” (Participant 6, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Another participant stated that within the school of social work, professors may lack knowledge on this subject:

“I feel like teachers in the school of social work may be a little afraid to teach it just because maybe they don't know how or how to approach it...I feel like each professor should implement it in their area of expertise such as micro and macro” (Participant 3, qualitative interview, February 2019).

In addition, a participant added the following:

“We've received minimal training in class but it hasn't been any in depth work. I mean they touch on the bio, psycho, social but then they always leave out the depth in part about the spiritual...if we are a generalist model program, we should have that included” (Participant 7).

Competency

Participants in this study were asked to share about a time when religion was necessary to discuss with their clients. 8 out of 10 participants agreed they experienced a time during their internship within the school of social work where religion was brought up. A participant in this study shared the social worker was unprepared to discuss religion with a client:

“There was a time at my internship last year in the bachelor's program. It was my second year of the bachelor program with CFS and I was Title IV-E as well and I shadowed a social worker and upon going out to her client's house, she says there's three things we don't talk about politics, money, and religion and she said, it's just to flow. Well people get too worked up about it. We're not going to talk about it. And so funny because the house we go to, she's already familiar with the client who's very much so religious and it was maternal grandmother taking in her granddaughter who was about like six years old, very religious and attends church. It's part of her therapy and spirituality and her daughter is 23, she lost rights and she's an addict so she wasn't even getting her [parent] rights back and the grandmother was keeping the child but she was going to church and doing all these events. And I remember the social worker feeling like maybe the child is being brainwashed or just, you know, she had her own biases and her own beliefs about the religion before going into the house. And I think the child wasn't doing anything abnormal to me. She was

Christian and she was singing worship songs and she seemed to be doing well. But the social worker had a different point of view and wasn't really trained on how to deal with it and didn't want to address any of the religious part of their life that was going on, which was actually benefiting the child's life" (Participant 3).

Another participant also shared their experience during their internship:

"At my internship last year, one of the children that I was investigating, they were talking about how they never get to celebrate a birthday. And so naturally you think that it's because they're in poverty or because they're impoverished, but it was actually because they're Jehovah's witness. So, it was kind of like I was just assuming that it was because they were impoverished. And then once the dad told us that they were Jehovah's witness, everything kind of clicked and made sense. Cause I knew that much about that specific sect of religion. So, I was able to understand, okay, this is why she doesn't have it. Not because, you know, she can't afford it. So I was able to empathize with her a little bit better" (Participant 7, qualitative interview, February 2019).

In addition, a participant discussed an experience with a child's placement where religion was involved:

"It was in my bachelor's program and it was with my client and he did not want to go back to a placement because they were too religious for him.

There were too many expectations and he was the one that brought it up. I didn't bring it up" (Participant 4).

On the other hand, 2 participants have not faced a situation when religion was discussed. Participants were asked how they would feel if they encountered a situation like this. A participant responded:

"If I knew what I was talking about, I'm pretty sure I'd be comfortable with it. Um, but if I wasn't too aware of their religious practices, I would kind of be afraid to offend them in any way. Um, so yes, I think it's very important to understand it. Whatever religion they practice, because I don't want to offend anybody. I don't want them to close down for any certain reason" (Participant 8, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Furthermore, one participant has not had contact with clients in their internship and has not been through this experience. Participant answered the following:

"I haven't worked with clients. [In the future] I want to try to find out information for them about their religion and what resources are available to them in their area and provide information that way" (Participant 9, qualitative interview, February 2019).

Ideas for Future Learning

Participants were asked to share their ideas on how they would be able to learn more about discussing religion with clients. Participant reported:

"Be more open about it. Um, you've always heard the saying, don't talk politics and don't talk religion. So people think it's very confrontational. But

if there's a way that we can bring it up without being confrontational, being open and honest, willing to learn and share, then it takes away from that. I think it's important to understand this, especially in our line of work. Um, it's just like culture. We have to understand so we don't offend and when we walk into these homes or if they come to us, we have to be knowledgeable because it's a big important step. If we offend somebody, they're going to shut down on us. And also I think it's important that we do it in a non-confrontational way, umm not being judgmental. Um, and also too, whatever our faith is, don't push it onto somebody else and we might tend to do that. You know, we have to be very careful...I do think the agencies should [provide training], but I know there's a lot of red tape because of rules and regulations, you can't put state and church. Um, but like I said, it's a case by case and I do think agencies should be aware. How else are they going to help their clients? The more knowledge, the more we can help" (Participant 8).

Another participant in this study shared it should be taught in the school of social work and stated:

"Well I think if it was included into the school social work curriculum, um, also I guess if I just try to find ways to learn myself, I could do articles or reading research just like you're doing your research project on spirituality, religion, um, I've done papers about the same topic. But I think the ultimate goals for it to be taught in school" (Participant 3).

Summary

The interviews were conducted using a qualitative approach in order to allow the participants to elaborate on their answers. This approach allowed participants to express their opinions and experiences on religion in the social work field. Participants shared they are willing to learn more about this topic if they were educated on it and believe it is important to incorporate clients' religious practice in social work.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study was designed with the purpose to explore social work students' views on the integration of religion in social work practice. Based on the data collected for this study, this section will discuss the findings and the limitations. This section will also discuss recommendations for social workers of the importance of addressing clients' religious practice in social work practice. In addition, researcher included recommendations for future research. The findings of this study as well as former literature will be presented as support of these recommendations.

Discussion

Participants were able to provide their personal experiences at their internships in the social work program. All participants acknowledged that religion can be affiliated with clients in social work, and they shared their views on how religion can be incorporated as well as what religion means to them in their personal lives. Participants also disclosed observing social workers in their internships avoiding talking about religion with clients.

An important theme that was shown was religious involvement. Six participants indicated the importance of religion in their lives and nearly all of them indicated observing social workers at their agencies not discussing it with

their clients. Religion is important and often neglected, so social workers need to consider this during their assessment because it can be important for many clients and can affect the behaviors of some offending parents (Kent, 2012).

Related to this, the results indicated that social work students did not feel comfortable discussing religion with clients. Several participants acknowledged the importance of addressing clients' religious practice; however, some participants disclosed they are unable to address this with clients. As noted in the literature review, Eckert (2015) found that practitioners will only discuss religion with clients if clients bring it up first. This creates an issue in the social work profession because this aspect in a client's life may never be assessed which can result in an incomplete or poor assessment. Social work students are continuously told that clients are the experts in their family and can help social workers provide them with the necessary services. Thus, allowing clients to discuss their religious practice without waiting for them to bring it up first helps the social worker to assess if their religion is a strength or a concern.

Furthermore, a theme that was identified in this study was self-awareness. A participant shared her insight on a barrier that could be encountered and stated that clients may get offended if they do not have a religious practice. Another participant disclosed that clients who feel strongly about their religious practice and that its omission can create a barrier. Being aware of these problems may be important to ensure that they do not affect client engagement. Furthermore, religions could be a source of social support as there is some evidence that

people reach out to religious and faith communities' leaders for counseling rather than mental health providers (Kane & Jacobs, 2013).

Assessing for religious practice can help implement a more comprehensive case plan to best fit a client's needs. This skill can be learned in the social work programs or trainings for social workers who are renewing their license. Urdang (2010) shares his recommendations for developing self-awareness in students by emphasizing self-awareness academically and in the field; reclaiming psychodynamic theories; and providing special educational experiences such as video labs and observational experiences. Thus, increased self-awareness regarding religion could allow social workers to assess themselves, how they would handle situations based on their beliefs, and whether their values could impact practice.

Furthermore, a theme that came up was the lack of training social work students have experienced within the school of social work program. Students disclosed not being provided a course or training that taught them how to discuss religion with clients. This theme is accordance with the findings in Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, and Achenbaum (2015). Oxhandler et al. (2015) conducted a national survey that asked LCSW's about their educational experiences. The study found that participants agreed they had received little to minimal training.

Even though the participants for the present study agreed on the lack of preparedness during graduate school, the participants were open in learning how

to address these concepts. Participants in this study had not received training in their internships neither. In addition, few participants have been told not to talk about religion with clients from social workers at their internships. This creates an issue for students that will get hired on as social workers as they will be under the impression that they shouldn't discuss religion with their clients. There is still a need for improvement in social work programs to integrate courses and training that can enhance social work students' learning and education. Social work students can learn to integrate clients' religious practice once they get hired on as social workers by observing professors and/or role playing with other students in class. It is essential for the schools of social work to communicate with the agencies that are utilized as internships to enhance the field learning.

Limitations and Strengths

One of the limitations for this study was the sample size. The sample size was only 10 participants, which limits its generalizability although it should be noted that participants were all from different backgrounds, gender, race, age, educational level, cohorts, and specialization. Two participants that had initially signed up were unable to conduct the study. This was due to the time frame which was another limitation. Participants couldn't be recruited until researcher received approval from IRB. Another limitation were the participants for this study which only included social work students. Future research should conduct the same study with social workers. A sample population of social workers may

reveal different outcomes and obtain better responses due to their exposure working with clients. The sampling method was also another limitation as it wasn't done randomly, which might have biased the results as well.

A strength for this study was the qualitative approach used for research. This approach allowed participants to express themselves with no limitation. Participants were allowed to share their personal experiences and views regarding their involvement in the school of social work program, which provided rich data that tends to not be capturing in surveys.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Religion does not have to be a confrontational or fearful conversation between the social worker and the client. As demonstrated in the literature review and the results of this study, it is important to recognize client's religious practice to help implement appropriate goals that align with the individual's needs. Religion can act as a source of support or a limitation for clients in accordance to their actions and involvement with CFS. It is an ethical obligation for social workers to serve clients with the upmost dignity and respect and including their religious views is part of that. Aside from schools of social work providing adequate training for social work students, agencies such as children and family services should also offer additional training for social workers who do not plan a to attend school. The social work practice is always evolving and such training

can encourage social workers to start implementing this into their everyday practice.

The NASW Code of Ethics has already expressed the importance of social workers being culturally competent. The Council on Social Working Education includes educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS) which includes the social work competencies. Competencies 2 and 7, engaging diversity and assessing individuals/families, align most with being inclusive of every part of the client's life. Thus, social work programs should add to the education students receive by integrating a course or training that will teach students appropriate ways to discuss client's religious practice.

Further research on this topic is encouraged to better understand the integration of religion in social work practice. Future researchers can replicate this study and recruit social workers as participants to assess their views on this topic. Having social workers as participants can lead to a more detailed qualitative interview because of higher exposure working with clients. This study highlighted the lack of religious training students receive on behalf of the school of social work program and the discomfort students experience when discussing religion with clients. Few participants mentioned hearing from other social workers at their agency that religion shouldn't be discussed. Thus, future research can study why social workers do not discuss religion with clients.

Conclusion

Overall, this study provided BASW and MSW social work students with insight on the importance of integrating clients' religious practice. Participants were unsure on how they would handle situations when religion would be necessary to discuss and have observed social workers not assessing for this with their clients. However, participants believed it was important to start assessing clients' religious views and can start doing so with the support of the social work program. Participants agreed this was a study that needed to be conducted as they believe religion isn't being talked about as much as it should be within the social work profession.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

Instrument Guide Interviewing Questions

Introduction: Thank you for volunteering for this study. Your identity will not be used in any part of it. Your participation is an important process for the success of this project. Please answer questions as honestly as you can. You can abstain to answer any question. Should you become uncomfortable during the interview, we can stop at any time. Do you still want to continue with the interview?

Participant Code Number:

Date:

Demographic Questions

1) What is your Ethnicity?

Asian ___ Pacific Islander ___ White ___ Native American ___ African American ___
Latino/a Hispanic ___ Other/specify _____

2) What is your age?

Age group (circle one) 21-31 32-42 43 and older

3) What Gender do you affiliate with? (Circle one) M F Other _____

4) Are you in the BASW or MSW Program?

5) What year are you in?

6) What is your area of specialization?

Research Questions

1. Please tell me about your views on religion?

2. Do you think it's important to talk about religion with your clients? Why or why not?

3. Have you received training on how to discuss religion with clients?

a) If yes, could you tell me about it?

b) If not, is this a training you would like to take?

c) If yes, who should provide the training?

4. What barriers or issues do you see encountering if you don't discuss religion with your client?
5. During your involvement in the school of social work, have you experienced a time when religion was necessary to discuss with clients?
 - a) If yes, what did you do?
 - b) If no, how would you feel if you did?
6. What would help you start learning about the topic?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine Social Work Students' Views on the Integration of Religion in Social Work. The study is being conducted by Araceli Delgado, an MSW student under the supervision of Dr. James Simon, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work, California State University of San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee at California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine social work students' views on the integration of religion in social work.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked a few questions on their views on discussing religion with clients, how prepared they feel doing so, and whether they believe incoming social work students should start learning about this topic.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is voluntary and is not a school requirement. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences. This interview will be recorded for content analysis purposes. Participant may ask to hear the recording for content they do not wish to be utilized in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and participants names will remain anonymous. All data and recordings will be destroyed after completion of the study.

DURATION: It will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes to conduct interview.

RISKS: There are no major foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. James Simon at 909-537-7224 (email: james.simon@csusb.edu).

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) at California State University, San Bernardino after August 2019.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older. **California State University, San Bernardino**

Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 1/18/2019 VOID AFTER 1/17/2024
IRB# SW1912 CHAIR James Simon

APPENDIX C
AUDIO INFORMED CONSENT

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

Place an X mark here

Date

I agree to be tape recorded: _____ Yes _____ No

APPENDIX D
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

This study you have just completed was designed to explore students' views on the integration of religion in Social Work. The study's objectives are to assess if students believe religion is important to discuss with clients in social work, and if they feel prepared to do so. Researcher is also interested in analyzing students' views on the current curriculum in the School of Social Work and if a course on this topic should be given to incoming social work students. This is to inform you that no deception is involved in this study.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. James Simon at 909-537-7224. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after August 2019.

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