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Spiritual Maturity: An Exploratory Study and Model for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Spiritual maturity is a fundamental dimension of human development that can help inform macro and micro level social work practice. On the macro level we need spiritually mature leaders who can help form coalitions of spiritually maturing people across the boundaries of nation, religion, class, gender, culture, and race. At the micro scale, there is a need for spiritually mature parents, leaders, and professional healers who have the courage, wisdom, and skills required to help navigate families and local communities through the stormy seas of accelerating ecobiopsychosocial-spiritual change. It is our premise that this task of describing spiritual maturity can and must be accomplished. In this paper, we report the findings of a study we have conducted, which explored how 200 adults view spiritual maturity. Implications of these findings for local and global social work practice are then advanced.

Introduction

What is spiritual maturity?

At the beginning of the 21st Century, this question is not just a fascinating academic topic, but arguably one the most important issues facing humanity today. We view the process of spiritual maturity as a fundamental dimension of human development that can help inform macro and micro level social work practice.

On the largest scale, the survival of humanity is now at risk. In a world armed with weapons of mass destruction, filled with ailing ecosystems, and populated with vast numbers of depressed, hungry, and thirsty people, the need for higher consciousness has never been more apparent. The case could be made that, more than ever, we need spiritually mature leaders who can help form coalitions of spiritually maturing people across the boundaries of nation, religion, class, gender, culture, and race.

For example, the possibility that spiritual maturity may lead to religious toleration offers hope in an age of mass casualty terrorism and war that is often religion-inspired (Spinner-Halev, 2005). In addition, the likelihood that spiritual maturity may also be associated

with attitudes of connection, commitment, and optimism may encourage professional helpers and leaders who are concerned that our youth are significantly more disconnected and pessimistic in their attitudes and values than the last three previous generations (Smith, 2005).

Ironically, rather than serving as a positive and unifying force, some politically powerful religious institutions have too often fueled unnecessary wars and other global conflicts (Spinner-Halev, 2005). In the name of religion some extremists, dedicated to terrorist acts, have succeeded in disrupting dreams for peace on earth. How is it that religion can be viewed as *both* the culprit in human affairs *and* the anticipated cure for all its maladies? Could it be that an explanation for this conundrum can only be found by delineating more clearly between spiritual maturity and immaturity in our religious practice and leadership?

On a smaller, more micro scale, there is a need for spiritually mature parents, leaders, and professional healers who have the courage, wisdom, and skills required to help navigate families and local communities through the stormy seas of accelerating ecobiopsychosocial-spiritual change. For example, since men are most often the perpetrators of interpersonal violence, the growing interest in spirituality in the U.S. men's movement may help foster a new model of male maturity that is less violent and more cooperative (Castellini, et al, 2005).

Today's social workers may see the need for spiritual maturity in many everyday practice settings. For example, the effectiveness of parenting and teaching may be associated with the spiritual maturity of parents and teachers. Leaders who are *developmentally capable* of going beyond ego may be especially prepared to make wise decisions in institutions and communities. The possibility that spiritual maturity could lead the way to religious tolerance and global deep peace offers some measure of hope in an age where too many of our dreams for the good life have literally been blown away.

It is our premise that this task of describing spiritual maturity can and must be accomplished. In this paper, we report the findings of a study we have conducted, which explored how about 200 adults view spiritual maturity. Implications of these findings for local and global social work practice are then forwarded.

Literature Review

Multiple meanings

Although the literature provides many perspectives on spiritual maturity, these perspectives are not necessarily exclusive. Indeed, spiritual maturity is a construct that can be assessed from at least the following four perspectives.

Developmental perspective: From this perspective, spiritual maturity involves a synthesis of all the interrelated dimensions of human development, including the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual. This a synthesis requires not only the evolutionary growth within each of these five developmental lines, but also the integration of all the aspects of the self-system into a purposive whole (Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986; Washburn, 1988).

Perspectives of process and state of being: Spiritual maturity might also be understood as a process and state of being. It is a process in as much as maturation in any dimension of development is a life-long, evolving project. From birth through death, the individual moves from more simple understandings to the more complex person-in-environment context that is constantly changing. It is also a state of being in as much as there are striking commonalties in the “deep features” of the world’s great wisdom traditions (including spiritual wisdom about purpose and values) despite the differences often observed across the more “surface features” of the various religious communities (Wilber, 1999, 2000).

Individual and collective perspectives: Spiritual maturity can also be given individual, community, and even universal meanings. Each person may have her own unique definition of spiritual maturity that reflects to a varying degree her own individual, family, and community values. Many of the members of a particular family, culture, religion, or community may define spiritual maturity in terms of the rituals, doctrines, and beliefs shared by that particular group.

Religious and trans-religious perspectives: Finally, spiritual maturity can be viewed from both religious and what we are calling trans-religious perspectives. When the religious perspective is taken, the author associates spiritual maturity with an adherence to the specific doctrines, rituals, and beliefs of her own religion (Carson, 2007). In contrast, from a Trans religious perspective, wisdom is drawn from many traditions, and open-mindedness and critical thinking is applied towards both one’s own religion and the religions of others (Allport, 1950). A study of the literature shows that in the USA, for over a century, many religiously-oriented authors have used the two terms “spiritual maturity” and “religious maturity” synonymously (James, 1999). In addition, some authors have made distinctions not only between spirituality and religion, but also between “inauthentic” and “authentic” paths to spiritual maturity (e.g., Anthony, Ecker, & Wilber, 1987).

Current religious and trans-religious perspectives

Currently there appears to be significant public and professional interest in the subject of spiritual maturity, and this interest is related by large numbers of people to the subject of religious maturity. There are now over 2,250,000 internet sites listed by Google on the topic of religious maturity, and approximately 1,830,000 (about 19% fewer) sites listed on the topic of spiritual maturity. Most of these spiritual maturity listings (over 2/3 of the first 100) appear to have significant religious context. Over 60% of social workers now use spiritual interventions in their practices (Sheridan, 2004), and spiritual /interventions have been shown to be effective in increasing numbers of communities settings, including assisted living (Vela, 2005) as well as in the prevention and intervention with HIV/AIDS (Murray, 2005).

Although the United States has one of the highest percentages of religious people, and although the majority of them are Christian, the country is also the most religiously diverse in the world (Eck, 2001). Not surprisingly, the literature related to spiritual development in the United States is also diverse. We divided this literature into two categories introduced above: *religious* and *trans-religious* models of spiritual development. In order to further illustrate these two categories and some of the diversity of thought in the USA, several representative examples of religious and trans-religious models will be briefly described below.

The two Christian models presented (Table 1) contain both similar and diverse characteristics. They are similar since they both reflect the general tendency in the United States to emphasize the importance of the individual's direct experience of God (Bloom, 1992), and different as they pose contrasting views about spiritual development.

Table 1: Two religious models of spiritual development

Westerhoff's (1976) four growth rings of faith	Gibson's (2004) levels of Christian maturity
Experienced faith (early childhood)	Accommodation to God's law
Affiliative faith (late childhood, adolescence)	Need for and obedience to God's law
Searching faith (late adolescence)	Principle-centered commitment to Christian world view
Owned faith (early adulthood.)	Kingdom-centered commitment to God's glory

Westerhoff's (1976) model theorizes that rather than passing through a process of developmental stages that involve qualitatively

different world views, a growth “ring“ occurs wherein the child’s early faith experiences provide a foundation for the mature adult’s personal integration and ownership of his original faith. Although citing Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development, which is not specific to any particular religious framework, Gibson’s (2004) levels of Christian spiritual maturity is part of a model in which the specific doctrines, rituals, and beliefs of his Christian faith are dominant at each level of development. Gibson describes Christian maturation as a movement from accommodation to law to what he calls a kingdom-centered commitment to the Christian God.

In contrast to religious models of spiritual development, trans-religious models “go beyond” the doctrines, rituals, and beliefs of any particular religion or belief system and attempt instead to find commonalities that stretch across the world’s many faith systems and wisdom traditions. Trans-religious models of spiritual development are not hostile towards any religion, but are respectful of *both* religious diversity and of the basic similarities that the world’s wisdom traditions have to offer humanity.

These trans-religious models also have similarities and differences. Most tend to emphasize the individual’s movement from identification with ego and personal experience towards a consciousness characterized by loving responsibility for the well being of all people, living things, and ecosystems. However, for example, some of these models emphasize stages of faith, while other models emphasize levels of consciousness.

Underhill’s (1911) classic book on mysticism draws from many spiritual writers as she outlines a series of stages through which a number of mystics passed on their way to “waylessness” or “higher states” of spiritual consciousness. Perhaps Fowler’s (1981) research on the stages of faith is the most widely used model for evaluating levels of spiritual and particularly religious development. It offers the practitioner a way to understand any given client’s belief system. Genia’s (1990) stages of faith are similar to the Fowler model in terms of providing a parsimonious way to understand the process of spiritual growth. The most inclusive view of the development of consciousness is Wilber’s (2000) Full Spectrum Model which integrates psychological and spiritual practices from both the East and the West. All these models are briefly summarized in Table 2. To fully maximize the wisdom they contain, the reader will want to consult the original works.

Table 2: Four trans-religious models of spiritual development and interrelated levels of maturity

Fowler's (1981) stages of faith	Underhill's (1911) stages of mysticism	Genia's (1990) stages of faith	Wilber's (2000) stages of consciousness development
Intuitive-projective (imagination)	Nature mysticism Union with life	Egocentric	Pre-personal Pre-rational
Mythic-literal (symbol and ritual)		Dogmatic	
Synthetic-conventional (majority of people)		Transitional	Personal Rational
Individuative-reflective (struggle)	Metaphysical , Mysticism Illumination	Reconstructed	
Conjunctive (paradox-transcendence)			
Universalizing (universal community)	Divine Mysticism Union	Transcendent	Transpersonal Trans-rational

Gender issues in spiritual maturity

There is strong evidence that gender is a factor that is especially associated with measures of spirituality and religiosity. A recent major study of 3680 college students, for example, found strong associations between gender and spiritual development and religious identity (Bryant, 2007). Individual of both genders with a more feminine sex role orientation have also been found to report stronger spirituality (Disponett & Bresch, 2007). For men, public religious activity is generally associated with their own health and well-being, whereas women associate both public religious activity and spiritual experiences with their health and well-being (Maselko & Kubzansky, 2006).

Men are also generally much more dangerous than women, and this male aggression is thought to be at least in part linked to developmental factors (as well as genetic factors). Men are more likely to commit acts of violence than women (Katz, (2006) and are

more likely to have narcissistic disorder, (Vaknin, 2007). Male violence has been associated with developmental maturity for Northern European (Eriksson, Hester, Keskinen, & Pringle, 2008) and Latino populations (Welland & Ribner, 2007). Thus, in a world where men still have the majority of key global leadership positions, humanity remains especially at risk for the continued use of aggression as a solution to our complex local and global challenges.

Spiritual Maturity in the Social Work Literature

Despite the increasing incorporation of spirituality in social work education and practice (Cowley & Derezotes, 1994; Sheridan, 2004) there is relatively little in the literature on the subject of spiritual maturity. However, some social workers have noted that if practice is applied developmental theory, then spiritually oriented social work practice is the applied theory of spiritual development (Cowley, 1993). Transpersonal theories of consciousness development have been applied to spiritually oriented practice with social work populations by a number of social work academics (Cowley, 1996; Smith, 1995; Canda & Smith, 2001; Cowley, 2001; Derezotes, 2005). However, there has been relatively little research that explores the underlying theories, goals, or practice outcomes associated with these emerging social work practice models.

Recent research in spirituality increasingly addresses specific populations and methods. For example, spiritual counseling has been utilized to help address various aspects of the aging experience (Stancil, 2003). Other studies suggest that gender may affect levels of religiosity within the United States (Gay, 2005). Some feminist scholars have argued that collaboration between contemporary religion and feminism is possible (McElroy, 2005). Still lacking, however, is a practical understanding of the concept of spiritual maturity that could help inform social workers as they make assessments, interventions, and evaluations across all levels of practice.

The Current Global Religious Resurgence

We live in a time of religious resurgence that is cyclical, global, and complex (Derezotes, in press). Participation in religion waxes and wanes over time (Kurth, 2005) and our current global wave of religiosity began during the last decades of the 20th Century and continues into the first decade of the Third Millennium. In fact today more people self-identify as religious, than ever before in history (Armstrong, 2006). Part of this wave involves an increase in fundamentalism; which has occurred in all the major global religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism,

Confucianism, and Sikhism (Armstrong, 2001). However, religious pluralism is also increasing in many global areas, including Europe, the Middle East, the United States, China and Russia (Thomas, 2007).

This resurgence of religion is a social work issue because the continued growth of such interrelated global survival threats as nuclear war, mass casualty terror, climate change, overpopulation, and destruction of natural resources have all been associated by many experts with the current religious resurgence and accompanying tension between fundamentalists of various faiths (e.g., Kazen, 2008; Orsi, 2007; Philpott, 2007; Armstrong, 2006). In addition, there is widespread evidence that these global survival threats almost always have the greatest impact on poor and oppressed populations (Derezotes, in press).

Methodology

Questions like, “how do we identify spiritually mature people, what can they teach us about spiritual development, and do women and men have different views about spiritual maturity?” helped to provide the thrust for this exploratory study.

A qualitative methodology was designed by our student-faculty research team to facilitate the gathering of information related to the study questions. Respondents were selected through a structured convenience sample method. In MSW level classes taught by the lead author, students were given the choice of several out-of-class assignments. One assignment was to interview the most spiritually mature woman and the most spiritually mature man they either personally knew or wanted to meet. Although students were given didactic instruction and then participated in classroom dialogues about the nature of spiritual maturity, students were also encouraged to further refine the concept of spiritual maturity for them.

After exploring the relevant literature, the lead author created a 10-item questionnaire to use in this study (See column one in Tables 3 and 4). The items selected reflect many of the key characteristics of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual maturity described by most developmental researchers and theorists (Wilber, 1999, 2000, 2006). The questions were pre-tested with 20 students and community members, and appropriate revisions made. Participating students were then given copies of our Spiritual Maturity Exploratory Questionnaire (SMEQ) to use as a guide for their interviews. A brief training on interviewing techniques was conducted. Each student identified the woman and man they would interview, then arranged and completed the interviews using the questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were submitted to the instructor. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, no identifying information was collected.

The diversity of the student interviewers closely reflected the diversity of the region in which the study was conducted. About half of the students identified themselves as belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The remaining half of the students identified themselves as belonging to a variety of other Christian (about 25% of total) and non-Christian religions or no religions at all. About 85% of the participating students were Caucasian, and about 66% were female.

These participant sample statistics have implications for the generalizability of the study. Students tended to interview people with faith systems similar to their own. The specific religious affiliation of the sample population is not representative of the adult USA population. About 50% of the sample is affiliated with the LDS religion, whereas only about 2% of USA adults currently identify as LDS (Mormon/Church of Jesus Christ Statistics, 2005). However, the total percentage of Christians in the study is about 75%, which is similar to the national average; currently about 76.5% of adults in the USA identify themselves as Christian (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2004). In addition, the sample consists of a group of adults identified by social work students, and this student group is also not representative of the USA population as a whole.

Interviews were conducted over three semesters. At that point (almost one year) no new major themes were emerging from the data so the collection phase of the study was ended. One hundred and two students had completed the assignment. A total of 98 women and 100 men had been interviewed. Most interviews were conducted face to face, but about 10% were done by phone. This was usually because the subject lived out of state. Most of the interviews were conducted at the homes or offices of the respondents. After each set of about 25 interviews was collected, the instructor debriefed student interviewers in group sessions. Discussions during these sessions helped the instructor and interviewers to identify and find consensus on the major themes that had emerged for each of the ten questions in the SMEQ.

Data analysis was conducted by the research team, consisting of the lead author and three graduate level research assistants (two females and one male). All data analysis was informed by established research design methods (Creswell, 2003). The instructor conducted training with each of the three students, regarding data interpretation and self-study methods. Self-study methods focused upon efforts by each team member to understand his/her, own biases about spiritual maturity. All questionnaires were read by at least three members of the research team. Each team member created her own separate notes and was able to dialogue with other team members about the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Findings

Key themes emerged in each of the question areas (see Tables 3 and 4). Regarding the relationship between spirituality and religiosity (item 1a) the vast majority of spiritually mature women (99%) and men (94%) agreed that these two constructs are different, although many women and men thought that religion and spirituality could influence each other.

Table 3: Summary of findings, items 1 through 5.

Spiritual maturity (SpMa) items	Most common female themes*	Most common male themes*
(1a) Are spirituality and religion different?	Yes (99%)	Yes (94%)
(1b) Define spirituality	Relationship with God or Higher Power (G/HP) Connect with self and universe Personal soul, inner being	Relation with G/HP Connect with self and universe Relationship to nature
(1c) Define religion	External, organized institution	External, organized institution
(2) Define SpMa	Live according to values Deep relationship with G/HP Peace/reverence with self, world Content with my beliefs	Deep relationship with G/HP Live true to belief about G/HP Peace/reverence with self, world Know what I believe
(3) What life experiences support SpMa	Parents, marriage, birth Friends, mentors, teachers Church Spiritual practice Suffering, death Spiritual experiences (dreams, visions)	Parents, marriage, birth Friends, mentors, teachers Church, religious activities Suffering, death Study, education Spiritual experiences (in nature)
(4) What life experiences are obstacles to SpMa	Personal factors (poor self-discipline, selfish, fear) Friends, family, husband	Personal factors (poor self-discipline, selfish, fear) Religion Friends, family

	Religion Stress (about life, money, world)	Stress (about work, money)
(5) Relationship between SpMa and social relationships	Love directly related to SpMa Seek spiritual connections	Love directly related to SpMa Seek spiritual connections

*Females in study n=98, males n=100, themes listed in descending order of frequency in each box

Men and women also defined spirituality and religion similarly (items 1b and 1c). The most common definitional theme for both genders was that spirituality has to do with the relationship one has with God (or Higher Power, Goddess, Great Spirit, etc.). The next most common theme for both men and women related spirituality to the connection a person can have with her own self and with the larger universe. The third theme for spiritually mature women was that spirituality is about the personal soul or inner being, in contrast with spiritually mature men who tended to see spirituality as being about a person's relationship with nature. Both women and men, however, agreed that, in contrast to spirituality, religion is an organized institution that is external to the self.

Overall, the women and men also held somewhat similar definitions of spiritual maturity (item 2). Women tended to emphasize the importance of living a spiritual life according to one's own values. One woman stated, "Having the personal integrity to say what I do and then do what I say... that is maturity". To a lesser extent, women also emphasized the importance of the spiritual person's relationship with God. (Some women used the term "Goddess" or "Heavenly Mother" or "Higher Power" instead of "God"). Next, came the idea of peace and reverence with self and the world, followed by contentment with one's own beliefs.

In contrast, men especially emphasized the importance of a deep relationship with God or a Higher Power in order to be spiritually mature. Second to that value came the idea of living true to one's beliefs about God or a Higher Power. Finding peace of mind and developing reverence for self and the world was followed by the importance of knowing what one believes. "The spiritually mature man knows himself and what he stands for", explained one man.

When asked what life experiences supported spiritual maturity (item 3) both spiritually mature men and women emphasized such vital family experiences as the influence of their own parents, their own marriages, and the birth of their own children. A typical statement was, "the birth of my daughter was the most profound spiritual experience of my life." Friends, mentors, and teachers were mentioned as next most important influences by both women and

men. Although both genders mentioned church as a third factor, women emphasized their spiritual practices whereas men tended to emphasize their religious practices as influential. Another difference between genders was that women tended to emphasize the importance of such spiritual experiences as dreams and visions, whereas men emphasized spiritual experiences they had out in nature. One man said, "I feel most spiritual when I am out alone on the river fly fishing."

Spiritually mature women and men were also asked what life experiences are common obstacles to their spiritual maturity (item 4). In response, personal characteristics such as lack of self-discipline, selfishness, and fear were most reported by both genders. One woman said, "I get lazy and just put off doing my meditation." Women also emphasized that friends, family members, and their husbands put demands on their time and energy, whereas men were more likely to emphasize the pressures from their churches to conform to doctrines, rituals, and beliefs as obstacles to their spiritual development. Another female respondent said, "my children and husband are constantly needing something from me, so I have no time for spirituality". Another women complained: "My family members expect me to conform to *their* religious beliefs." An additional gender difference was that women emphasized life stressors such as demands of their children and family in contrast to men who were generally more concerned about work and money-related stressors. One man stated, "I know it would be good for me to take off some time at work and reconnect, but there are way too many pressures to be in the office."

Both men and women generally agreed that love for other people is directly related to spiritual maturity (item 5). Many also stated that they started to seek relationships that had a special spiritual connection, especially as they grew older. When asked about the relationship between service and spiritual maturity (item 6), both men and women agreed that service is an essential activity of spiritually mature people. A typical response was, "in life it's really true, the more you give, the more you get."

Table 4: Summary of findings, items 6 through 10.

Spiritual maturity (SpMa) items	Most common female themes*	Most common male themes*
(6) Relationship between SpMa and service	SpMa directly related to service More you give, more you get	SpMa is associated with service More you give, more you get
(7) Relationship between SpMa and life and death	Learn to accept, not fear death Respect life, make it meaningful Believe in life after death	Learn to accept, not fear death Believe in life after death Respect life, make it meaningful
(8) Relationship between SpMa and spiritual diversity	Learn acceptance, love of others Learn to respect differences Let go of prejudice	Learn acceptance, love of others Learn to respect differences Let go of prejudice
(9) Who is the most SpMa person you know of	Religious spiritual leader (most named are female) Family member (Most named are female) Friend	Religious spiritual leader (Both male and female) Family member Friend
(10) How can a social worker help foster SpMa in client?	Have love and compassion Become self-aware Develop her own SpMa Be respectful, non-judgmental	Develop his own SpMa Be open to talk about SpMa Listen respectfully Accept diversity

*Females in study n=98, males n=100, themes listed in descending order of frequency in each box

Both men and women thought that spiritual maturity is linked to the ability to accept, rather than deny and fear, death (item 7). The spiritually mature women also emphasized how life itself had become more meaningful and precious to them. One woman said, "I appreciate every moment more and more." The spiritually mature men, in contrast, more emphasized how they had come to believe in the reality of life after death. One man stated, "Life is so short that if there was

no life afterwards, it would all seem quite insignificant and meaningless.”

The issue of spiritual diversity (item 8) seemed to resonate similarly with both men and women. Most agreed that as they became more spiritually mature, they learned to be more accepting and loving of other people, regardless of the differences between them. Similarly, there was also agreement that spiritual maturity is associated with learning to respect human diversity and let go of prejudice. “As you become more mature you start to realize that everyone is talking about the same Spirit and the same God”, said one man. “I used to believe that people with different religions than me would all go to hell, but as I got older I realized that there are many ways to heaven”, said another man.

When asked to identify the most spiritually mature people they knew (item 9) men and women differed in what gender they identified with. When asked who they look up to, women tended to identify more with other women in their extended families who they saw as spiritually mature. However, men seemed as likely to look up to a female as to a male within their families.

Finally, when asked to give advice to social workers who wish to help foster spiritual maturity, women and men emphasized different answers. Women emphasized that workers need to have love and compassion for their clients. They also suggested that workers need to know themselves and strive to develop their own spiritual maturity. One woman commented, “social workers who want to work with spirituality should be working on their own spirituality.” Finally, women wanted social workers to be respectful and non-judgmental with their clients.

In contrast, men most emphasized the importance of social workers developing their own spirituality maturity. The next most-important issue for the men was that the worker should be open to talking about spiritual maturity. The men also wanted social workers to listen respectfully. One man explained, “Spirituality is a very private thing and the social worker needs to be very sensitive, open minded, and not pushy.” Finally, the men emphasized the importance of accepting spiritual diversity.

Again, as discussed above, these findings reflect a specific religious population (LDS) that is not representative of the entire USA adult population. However, as will be discussed further, given the global religious revival that we currently are experiencing, the fact that such high numbers of religious respondents value spiritual diversity seems particularly encouraging.

Summary

The spiritually mature people identified by the student researchers seemed comfortable and often enthusiastic when talking about their spirituality. Most of them saw a relationship between spirituality and religion but also understood the terms as being different. Apparently both joyful and painful life events had influenced their spiritual development. Religion and family had been a support for some, and for others, more of an obstacle to their spiritual growth. Most agreed that the spiritual growth process, which typically involves some form of self-discipline, seemed to transform their relationship with other people, life, and death. In summary, respondents tended to especially value the three transreligious themes of loving acceptance (of self and others), self-discipline, and service.

Overall, women and men largely agreed on the key themes related to spiritual maturity. The main differences in their responses had more to do with the relative emphasis of some themes rather than in the overall content of the themes. Differences between the genders were moderate. For example, women seemed to value love and compassion in relationships and personal integrity with one's values somewhat more than men did. Men seemed to value individuality of spiritual experience and expression and their relationship with the sacred in nature somewhat more than women did.

Another key theme, strongly identified by both genders, was the importance of the social worker's own spiritual development and loving acceptance of others. According to both men and women, spiritually oriented social workers need to be working on their own spiritual development, as they strive to foster the spiritual development of their clients. In addition, the respondents expect social workers to be accepting of the diversity of spiritualities and religions that they encounter in their practice.

This study was conducted in an area of the USA with a high percentage of the population identified with one particular religion (LDS). As discussed above, this sample characteristic does not represent most of the USA, which does not reflect the same 50% level of LDS membership. However, there are many other regions of the country that have high population percentages of other specific religions (e.g., high Baptist membership in areas of the South or high Lutheran membership in areas of the Midwest). In addition, in association with the current global religious resurgence, high levels of religiosity are found in most areas of the USA and much of the world today.

A model of spiritual maturity

Based on a review of the literature and the findings of this study, a model of spiritual maturity utilizing a multi-dimensional

developmental framework is proposed. (See tables 5 and 6). Since mature or healthy spirituality depends on how we relate to ourselves, to each other, to the earth, and to the cosmos (Vaughan, 1996), the dimensions proposed include the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual, communal, and universal. The developmental dimensions are both intrapsychic/micro level (physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual) as well as interpsychic/macro level (social, communal, and universal). Since all of these developmental dimensions are interrelated, the spiritually mature person expands her boundaries to include and integrate all the ways a human being can grow, internally and externally. Since most spiritually mature people in the survey stressed the importance of the trans-religious attitudes of *loving acceptance, self-discipline, and service*, they are emphasized at each dimension of development.

The goals described in the developmental framework summarized in Table 5 can help inform assessments, interventions, and evaluations in social work practice. These goals can be modified to fit the developmental level and cultural norms of each unique client population. In general, as a person achieves the goals of spiritual maturity, she becomes more responsible and thus strives to be of service to others. Also, the more spiritually mature individuals and institutions become, the more accepting and inclusive they are of people who are different.

The majority of participant responses summarized in Tables 3 and 4 support the importance of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual development in the process of spiritual maturity (the top 5 rows of Table 5). We believe that, although only a minority of participant responses directly addressed what we call communal and universal development (the bottom 2 rows) these elements are also related to our study's reported themes of loving acceptance, self-discipline, and service. As Wilber (2006) has shown, there is increasing evidence that participation in the co-creation of what we call communities of spiritual and universal diversity is a level of developmental maturity that *follows and builds* upon the development of inner transformation and tolerance of spiritual and religious diversity.

Table 5: Goals of spiritual maturity in a multi-dimensional developmental framework

Developmental dimension	Proposed goals in the process of spiritual maturity
Physical (Body self)	Acceptance of and reverence for body of self and others Service to (care of) the body Use body to help foster the highest good of self and world
Emotional (Emotional self)	Acceptance of and reverence for emotions of self and others Use emotions to help foster highest good of self and world Love and compassion towards self and others
Cognitive (Mental self)	Acceptance of and reverence for spiritual power of mind Use mind to help foster highest good of self and world Acceptance of and reverence for life and death
Social (Tribal self)	Acceptance of and reverence for other people Use social skills to help foster highest good for self and others Develop spiritual intimacy in relationships with other people
Spiritual (Soul self)	Acceptance of and reverence for spirituality in self, all people, the world Develop spiritual intimacy in relationships with all life and eco-systems Protection of and care for spirituality autonomy in self and other people
Communal (Global self)	Acceptance of and reverence for local and global communities Serve the highest good of local and global communities Co-create communities of cultural diversity
Universal (Non-dual self)	Reverence for and unity with all living things and eco-systems Serve the highest good of all living things and eco-systems Co-create communities of universal diversity

Terminology introduced in the model may require further explication to help the reader understand their meanings. The *highest good* refers to the positive/loving intent that the spiritually mature

person holds for her self, other people, other living things, and the eco-systems that support all life. A *community of spiritual diversity* is one in which acceptance and reverence for the unique spirituality of each person in that community is cultivated and uniformly expressed. As introduced above, this value builds upon the value of tolerance and acceptance for the different spiritualities and religiosities of other people. A *community of universal diversity* also expresses acceptance and reverence towards all living things and the eco-systems that support all life. This concept builds upon the notion of community of spiritual diversity, and is supported by evidence-based developmental theories that suggest that spiritual development may gradually lead to increased responsibility for all living things and eco-systems (Wilber, 2006).

Implications for social work practice

The social work practitioner may want to have examples of interventions that can help foster spiritual maturity in her clients. The interventions provided in Table 6 are organized by developmental dimensions (vertical in rows) and by the themes of spiritual maturity (across in columns). The five developmental dimensions (physical, cognitive, social, physical, and spiritual) and the three spiritual themes (loving acceptance, self-discipline, and service) are all substantiated in the literature and further supported by our own research. The last two categories provided in Table 6 (“Community/Religious Self” and “Universal/Ecological Self”) have been added to the model based upon developmental theory and research drawn from our literature review, and reflect the developmental stages that we believe follow the first five stages.

Table 6: developmentally appropriate interventions: across categories of spiritual maturity

Developmental Dimension	Loving acceptance	Self-discipline	Service
Physical (Body self)	Development of positive body-image and view of sexuality	Self-care through exercise, diet, sleep	Physical care of other people, other living things, and ecosystems
Emotional (Emotional self)	Spirituality expressed through music, art, poetry, movement	Compassion and forgiveness work	Volunteer as a big brother, big sister, adopt-a-grandparent

Cognitive (Mental self)	Journaling and discussing thoughts	Sitting and walking meditation	Leadership in sitting and walking meditation groups
Social (Tribal self)	Practice of social skills in play groups.	Weekly spiritual study groups	Leadership in community dialogue groups
Spiritual (Soul self)	Creation and completion of personal rituals	Daily spiritual activities as part of personal discipline	Leadership in spiritual dialogues and Practice of spiritual intimacy
Community (Religious self)	Personal practice of one's own religious rituals	Weekly service activity through church organization	Participation in co-creation of Communities of Spiritual Diversity
Universal (Ecological self)	Awareness of oneness with nature through interaction with nature	Service projects in neighborhood, parks, wild lands	Participation in co-creation of Communities of Universal Diversity

We view this model of spiritual maturity as just a beginning framework for spiritually-oriented social work practice. These interventions described in Table 6 can be used to support the goals listed in Table 5. All interventions should be modified to fit the developmental levels and cultural norms of the client populations the social worker is serving. Workers and clients need to evaluate the model together when possible, making mid-course corrections throughout the beginning, action, and ending phases of practice.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Obviously the results of a study of a few hundred adults in one location in the United States cannot be generalized to represent all humans on the planet. Generalizability is particularly limited because of the specific religiosity of the study population and the student-status of the participating research assistants. Nevertheless, this study can help guide spiritually oriented social work practice as well as inform future research studies. Future studies might extend this research to other political, cultural, racial, and religious populations.

Variations on the findings would be expected in other regions of the nation and world. The results of such studies would be intriguing. Would researchers find similar results or would there be new findings as the size and diversity of the study population were increased?

Before we can hope to build a culture that is more spiritually mature, we might build some definitions and guidelines about what a religious or spiritually mature individual and/or culture would look like. Using Maslow's (1970) classic study aimed at defining the characteristics of a self-actualized person, we may now need to raise our sights to examine higher consciousness in efforts to determine what the characteristics of a *spiritually realized* individual might look like. As with all research endeavors, it is important to look to the literature to see what already has been accomplished, and to determine what the next step should be. Transpersonal literature suggests that a spiritually mature person would exhibit such qualities of Being as empathy, compassion, generosity, patience, loving kindness, generativity, integrity, inclusiveness, wisdom and discernment – to name a few. Future studies might identify individuals (living or dead) who are recognized as spiritually evolved Beings. By examining their lives, we may come closer to reaching one of social work's overarching goals of helping to co-create the good person within a good society.

Ken Wilber, who has been called “the Einstein of Consciousness”, has this to say about the task we face in the New Century:

The ecological crisis – or Gaia's main problem – is not pollution, toxic dumping, ozone depletion, or any such. Gaia's main problem is that not enough human beings have developed to the post conventional, world centric, global levels of consciousness, whereas, they will automatically be moved to care for the global commons (Wilber, 1999, p. 569).

Perhaps this observation by Wilber lends some credence to our sense of urgency about the search for a more complete understanding of spiritual maturity.

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