

Where is Spirituality in Social Work?

Tamika C. Baldwin, MSW, LLMSW

Janet N. Vaughn, MSW, LCSW, BCD

Candace Cotton, MSW

Halaevalu F. Ofahengaue Vakalahi, Ph.D., MSW

Abstract

This article is a critical analysis of the existing literature on spirituality in the profession of social work. The NASW Code of Ethics (2003) and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2008) acknowledge the importance of spiritual values and practices for the positive functioning of people. This analysis of the literature offers a forum for dialogue about the role of spirituality in social work education and practice. Greater understanding of spirituality and its value to diverse people in society is necessary for social workers to practice cultural competence social work. There are key approaches to education and practice that may hold much promise for enhancing social work's commitment to a holistic understanding of the human condition, respect for diversity, and competent and ethical social service.

Keywords: spirituality, religiosity, cultural competence, spiritually sensitive social work

My experience with spirituality in social work practice is inherent in the professional use of self. As I work with urban families I listen, show empathy, acceptance, and provide encouragement. I make assessments which include the African-centered perspective and demonstrate cultural competence – C. Cotton.

As a clinician I have embraced spirituality in my own practice. I respect differences of my clients and try to incorporate their spiritual preference in the treatment. It is my role to help them come to resolutions in ways that are meaningful and practical for them – J. Vaughn.

When thinking about incorporating spirituality in the social work profession, I am reminded how much spirituality affects my own life. It has shaped who I am and the way I see things. Without it, it would be impossible for me to continue on this lifelong fight for social justice – T. Baldwin.

As illustrated in the quotes above, spirituality may be defined, interpreted, and embraced in different ways across social work professionals and clients; nonetheless, spirituality remains integral to the health and well-being of both clients and practitioners. Social work as a profession prides itself on its ability to embrace and celebrate people from all walks of life, recognizing their unique experiences and lifeways, whether temporal or spiritual. An important lifeway that has served as a sustaining force in the lives of many people from across cultures is spirituality (Hodge & Limb, 2010). Today, the profession of social work continues to witness a resurgence of interest in spirituality which began in the late 1970s. The creation of professional journals dedicated to the discussion of this topic, increased search for spiritual experiences, the establishment of professional organizations including the Society for Spirituality and Social Work, and increased infusion of spirituality contents into social work curriculum reflect this

resurgence of interest in spirituality (Sheridan, 1999). “Spiritually-sensitive social work” (Sheridan, 2001) has also emerged as a key approach to practice that may hold much promise for enhancing social work’s commitment to a holistic understanding of the human condition, to respect for diversity, and to competent and ethical social work service.

Although the NASW Code of Ethics (2003) and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2008) acknowledge the importance of spiritual values and practices for the positive functioning of people, social work education and social work practice have somehow been inconsistent in teaching and utilizing these basic professional beliefs in practice (Canda, 2012). The inconsistency in the conceptualization of spirituality as well as the “either or” debate on the definition and the often interchangeable use of the constructs of spirituality and religiosity has contributed to the confusion and sometimes the inconsistency in the teaching and utilization of spirituality as a basic professional belief (Koenig, 2009; Nelson-Becker, 2003).

This discussion of the literature on spirituality in the context of the social work profession offers the opportunity for advancing the dialogue about the role of spirituality in both social work education and practice. Also discussed in this article are factors that may hinder or facilitate the integration of spirituality into the continuum of social work education to practice and vice versa.

Review of Relevant Literature

Spirituality is generally described in the social sciences as a multi-dimensional complex phenomenon (Bailly & Roussiau, 2010; Gall et al., 2005; Kalkstein & Tower, 2009; Pickard & Nelson-Becker, 2011). The historical references to spirituality have included the concept of religion; thus, they have been used interchangeably. In the past decade, what is written about these concepts of spirituality and religion has yielded “little systematic conceptualization” (Hill, 2000, p. 52) as spirituality has been perceived as esoteric and religion as apparent. The multiplicity in definitions of spirituality across disciplines, let alone cultures, has also contributed to confusion and disagreements, and perhaps inconsistency in its use in education and practice.

Social work as a profession evolved during an era in which philanthropy, charity, egalitarianism, and the protestant work ethic permeated society. Although social work does not endorse a particular religious faith or spiritual practice, the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) does ascribe to values which have the underpinnings of moral and religious principles inherent in the major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the social work literature, spirituality is often described as subjective. Some perceive spirituality as an extension of the self and as inherent in human nature whereas others understand it as a concept that is transferred through social and cultural exchange. Regardless of perception, an essential component of spirituality which offers some clarification to its meaning is that spirituality is deeply personal, referencing interconnectedness and universality, and living life as if its essence were vitalistic not mechanistic, being governed by transcending forces (Boykin & Toms, 1985).

In the profession of social work, spirituality is essential to understanding the nature of human beings as bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings and as an encompassing principle that guides our understanding and service to humanity (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). To this end, it is

imperative to be mindful of the many types of spirituality (i.e. the spirituality of Christians, Muslims, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, etc.) and healing practices as possible contributions to social work education and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Many theoretical frameworks are discussed in the literature pertaining to spirituality and religiosity. A few theories have been selected to frame this discussion including Jungian theory, African-centered perspective, strengths perspective, and psychosocial theory. These theories and perspectives provide a multi-dimensional lens through which to consider spirituality in social work. For instance, Sermabeikian (1994) explored Jungian psychology as a spiritual framework for understanding spirituality from the perspective of social work. In Jungian psychology, spirituality as a universal concept can facilitate perspectives beyond religious and philosophical differences (Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000). The humanist aspect of this theory offers a therapeutic benefit to social work and aids practitioners in conceptualizing spirituality in working with clients. Canda (Lecture, 2012) refers to spiritually sensitive social work as central to the understanding of spirituality and addressing the ways in which social work practitioners, clients, and communities seek a sense of meaning, purpose and connectedness as they strive toward their highest aspirations, maximizing their strengths and resources and working to overcome personal obstacles and environmental blocks. Compassion is deemed an essential component of working with clients. The practitioner that is spiritually sensitive shows compassion and empathy, but not “enmeshment” (Canda, 2012).

Furthermore, Lawrence-Webb and Okundaye (2007) offer the African-centered paradigm as a critical perspective on spirituality. In their work, the meaning of spirituality was explored in the lives of African American caregivers. Results affirmed the historical significance of spirituality as well as religiosity to the survival of African Americans in general as well as social work practitioners and educators who are of African American heritage. Effective social work practice that addresses psychosocial stressors among African Americans requires the integration of empowerment, ego psychology, and Afrocentric perspective (Lawrence-Webb & Okundaye, 2004).

Comparatively, Hodge (2001) examined the strengths perspective as a theoretical framework for defining spirituality in clinical social work. Using an interpretive anthropological framework as an assessment tool, spiritual strengths were identified by social workers and their clients as inclusive of rituals, supports and participation in faith-based communities, and the individual’s relationship with the “ultimate” or higher power, which facilitates coping. Integration of the multiple aspects of spirituality in social work with individuals and groups was perceived as a significant strength in clinical social work (Hodge, 2001).

Moreover, Ai (2002) explored theories by Erikson and Kohlberg relative to spirituality in social work practice. Spirituality was found to have more significant meaning in social work than religion alone and therefore, fundamentally contributive to the primary mission of the social work profession to enhance human functioning and well-being. In general, psychosocial theories define spirituality in terms of meaning, purpose and connectedness which provide significance to the underlying values and ethics of social work as a profession.

Connecting these theories and perspectives together, the NASW Code of Ethics calls on social workers to demonstrate respect and sensitivity toward clients' religious beliefs and practices. Because the need for spiritual fulfillment is a universal experience and spirituality has significant impacts on shaping an individual's journey, social workers must enhance their multicultural attitudes, skills, and sensitivity toward issues of gender, race, and other aspects of diversity (Kamya, 2000). Likewise, the CSWE Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards emphasize the necessity of critiquing and applying of theories and knowledge to understanding the multiple dimensions of the self, including spiritual development. Understanding spiritual development is a critical aspect of fully understanding the person in environment which informs social work intervention and further evaluation.

Spirituality for Client and Professional

Social work practice without the spiritual dimension is incomplete (Gotterer, 2001). As a profession that is rooted in spirituality (Gilbert, 2000), social work must continue to maintain and uphold the ethics of the field through its strategies and approaches to practice. Because spirituality is a very complex domain, social work uses a holistic framework to assist clients, while incorporating a strengths perspective (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Cascio, 1998; Leung, Chan, Ng, & Lee, 2009). In other words, social work embraces spirituality because it can be a major strength of the client and it focuses on promoting the growth of the individual and the greater good of the community (Cascio, 1998). As a major strength of clients, spirituality is an important cultural consideration, especially among African Americans and Native Americans who are often seen as a few of the most spiritual groups in the country (Gotterer, 2001; Hodge & Williams, 2002).

According to the literature, several themes exist relating to holistic strategies and approaches to dealing with spiritually-related ethical dilemmas. These approaches include assessment and practice models, interpersonal skills of the social worker, and understanding how a client utilizes spirituality. Relative to assessment, there are multiple ways to assess a client's spirituality and provide spirituality-based services. For example, in working with Native American clients, Hodge and Limb (2010) indicated that spiritual assessments may include spiritual genograms, histories, timelines, and eco-maps (Hodge, 2005). Furthermore, Cascio (1998) discussed methods of intervention including Gestalt techniques, journaling, bibliotherapy, metaphor, and various forms of prayer-like meditation. Spiritually-based cognitive therapy has also been as effective as traditional forms of therapy in dealing with anxiety disorders, depression, and bereavement (Hodge, 2005). Knowledge of spiritual resources in the community is important to assisting clients in culturally appropriate ways (Cascio, 1998). As such, social work practitioners are encouraged to collaborate with clergy and other spiritual leaders in the community (Gilbert, 2000) to advocate against discrimination of all clients, particularly emerging oppressed groups such as Muslims, LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, and so forth.

Critical to the helping process is the interpersonal skills of the social worker, particularly the professional use of self. One of the main themes identified in the literature relates to self-awareness as a means for one to begin to understand the spiritual values and beliefs of clients (Gilbert, 2000). Self-awareness is an important starting point in achieving cultural competence relative to spiritual diversity. That is, as differences in values occur, social workers do not need

to change their own spiritual beliefs, but rather understand and respect the client to avoid imposing one's beliefs upon the client (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Cascio, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Gotterer, 2001; Hodge & Williams, 2002). Also vital to self-awareness are being sensitive and nonjudgmental towards clients (Cascio, 1998; Gotterer, 2001). Genuineness, care, respect, support, and warmth are all qualities that illustrate spiritual competence (Hodge, 2005).

Relevant to the continuous development of skills and knowledge of social workers is training. In cultural competency training, each culture presents unique examples of values, beliefs and practices that could richly inform professional service. For example, the movement toward professional training of Black social workers embraced a holistic approach known as the Afrocentric paradigm which emphasizes group survival (Carlton-LaNey, 1999). The Afrocentric perspective categorizes a "quality of thought and practice" that is rooted and centered in the cultural image, interest, life experience, history, and traditions of people of African ancestry. This paradigm places an emphasis on personalizing the professional relationship which encourages the worker to participate emotionally with the client. The Afrocentric paradigm recognizes the spiritual or nonmaterial aspect of human beings (Carlton-LaNey, 1999).

Critical to informing the development of spiritually respectful social work practice is the countless accounts of people using their spirituality for multiple purposes including coping with deaths, tragedies, and life; and in general, for a sense of hope, meaning, and inner strength (Cascio, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Gotterer, 2001). Hodge and Limb (2010) argued that there is a positive link between spirituality and wellness, in terms of both physical and mental health. This ideology is embraced by people across cultures and communities. Among the diverse communities in which spirituality is a foundational element for survival is the African American community. Work on race relations and spirituality was an influential tool for the very existence of Black people in the U.S. (Martin & Martin, 2002). In the 19th century, race relations work advanced the survival, liberation, and well-being of Black people; this was a form of social work. Spirituality was used to deal with oppression, promote interracial cooperation, increase cultural diversity, and most importantly to maintain sanity in the Black community (Martin & Martin, 2002).

Analysis and Discussion

The existing literature speaks to the importance of spirituality in the profession. The literature indicates that principles of spirituality are built into the social work profession across a continuum from education to practice and vice versa. Further development of this principle in the profession is needed. Nonetheless, spirituality in social work is eclectic and incorporates theories of humanism, ego psychology, empowerment, the strengths perspective and Afrocentric perspective, to name a few. These theories and perspectives serve as a guide that informs spiritually sensitive practice. Of importance is the client's spirituality which can provide a blueprint of how social workers can help build souls and restore functioning and well-being.

The literature also states that spiritually sensitive social work, code of ethics, and relevant theoretical frameworks simultaneously serve as a guide for the social worker who provides spirituality related assessment, planning and intervention. Greater understanding of the

evolution of spirituality and its value to diverse people is a daunting task for social work professionals who are the drivers of cultural competence and spiritually sensitive practice.

Implications for Social Work Research, Practice, Policy and Education

Several implications for research, practice, policy, and education are offered to advance the dialogue about the role and place of spirituality, without definitional restrictions, in professional social work education and practice. First, additional research is needed to explore what works and what does not work relative to incorporating spirituality or religiosity into a client treatment plan. A critical component is client feedback on understanding and respecting spirituality/religiosity in the client-social worker relationship and modifying services accordingly. Future research is also needed to challenge the traditional bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of assessment by exploring the spiritual component of the self as part of a sociocultural model. Further development of evidence-based practice theories of spirituality/religiosity that expands across cultures is also needed.

Second, social workers have begun to adapt some relatively familiar methods/techniques to use in exploring spirituality with clients. Nevertheless, negative connotations and misunderstandings of the nature of spirituality as important to clients remain among segments of the profession. Recommendations include the development of campaigns, policies and procedures that promote in-service programs, workshops, and continuing education programs that target increases in understanding and relevant applications of spirituality/religiosity in the field. Training is needed on how to practically incorporate a spiritual perspective into professional practice such as with clients with chronic illness (HIV/AIDS, cancer), end of life care needs, and disaster relief, to name a few. Policies can allot funding for these developments and initiatives.

Third, social work education is in a prominent position to train a workforce knowledgeable and skilled in responding to clients with strong spiritual and religious backgrounds which can be utilized to promote health and well-being. Given the increased cross-cultural connections of the 21st century, social work curricula need to clearly reflect respect for spirituality and religiosity of clients as integral to social work practice. For example, social work education can expand the contents on spirituality and religiosity in program activities and the curriculum/classroom level through independent courses or the infusion of spirituality/religiosity contents throughout the curriculum. Courses focusing on social work ethics may benefit from the inclusion of ethical dilemmas with spirituality in practice, provided through required readings, media, and assignments. Practice courses may also include opportunities for developing interpersonal skills that are respectful of a client's spirituality or religiosity as well as creating a safe space for clients to explore possible spiritual strategy in their lives. Overall, further developments are needed on spirituality and religiosity in the profession of social work from education to practice and vice versa.

References

- Ai, A. L. (2002). Integrating spirituality into professional education: A challenging but feasible task. *Journal of Teaching in social Work*, 22(1/2), 103-127. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/>
- Bailly, N., & Roussiau, N. (2010). The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES): Validation of the short form in an elderly French population. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 29(2), 223-231. doi: 10.1017/S0714980810000152
- Barker, S. L., & Floersch, J. E. (2010). Practitioners' understandings of spirituality: Implications for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 46(3), 357-370. doi: 10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900033
- Boykin, A. W., Toms, F. D. (1985). Black child socialization: A conceptual framework. In McAdoo, H.P., McAdoo, J.L. (Eds). *Black children: Social, educational, and parental environments*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, Inc.
- Canda, E. (Guest Lecturer). (2012, September 21). Boston College Graduate School of Social Work Diversity Conference [webcast]. Cambridge, Ma: youtube.
- Canda, E. R. (1990). A holistic approach to prayer for social work practice. *Social Thought*, 16, 3-13.
- Canda, E.R. (1999). Spiritually sensitive social work: Key concepts and ideals. *Journal of Social Work, Theory and Practice*, I (1), 1 – 15.
- Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. (1999). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping*. New York: Free Press.
- Carlton-LaNey, I. (1999). African American Social Work Pioneers' Response to Need. *Social Work*, 44: 311-321.
- Cascio, T. (1998). Incorporating spirituality into social work practice: A review of what to do. *Families in Society*, 79(5), 523-531. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/230172958?accountid=12598>
- Gilbert, M. C. (2000). Spirituality in social work groups: Practitioners speak out. *Social Work with Groups: A Journal of Community and Clinical Practice*, 22(4), 67-84. doi: 10.1300/J009v22n04_06
- Gotterer, R. (2001). The spiritual dimension in clinical social work practice: A client perspective. *Families in Society*, 82(2), 187-193. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/61302352?accountid=12598>
- Hill, P. T., Pargament, K. I., Hood, Jr., R., McCullough, M. E., Swyers, J. P., Larson, D. B., Zinnbauer, B. J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 30, 52-77. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/>
- Hodge, D. R. (2001). Spiritual assessment: A review of major qualitative methods and a new framework for assessing spirituality. *Social Work*, 46(3), 203-214. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/>
- Hodge, D.R. (2005). Spirituality in social work education: A development and discussion of goals that flow from the profession's ethical mandates. *Social Work Education*, 24(1), 37-55.
- Hodge, D.R. & Limb, G.E. (2010). Conducting spiritual assessment with Native Americans: Enhancing cultural competency in social work practice courses. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 46(2), 265-285.
- Hodge, D.R. & William, T.R. (2002). Assessing African American spirituality with spiritual eco-maps. *Families in Society*, 83(5/6), 585-595.
- Kalkstein, S., & Tower, R. B. (2009). The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale and well-being:

- Demographic comparisons and scale validation with older Jewish adults and a diverse internet sample. *J Relig Health*, 48, 402-417. doi: 10.1007/s10943-008-9203-0
- Kamya, Hugo A. (2000). Hardiness and Spiritual Well-Being Among Social Work Students: Implications For Social Work Education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36, 231-240.
- Koenig, H.G. (2009). Research on religion, spirituality, and mental health: A review. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54(5), 283-291. Retrieved from medrc.sums.ac.ir
- Lawrence-Webb, C., & Okunday, J., (2007). Kinship and spirituality: Utilizing strengths of caregivers. *Journal of Health & Social Policy (The Haworth Press, Inc.)* 22(3/4), 101-119. doi: 10.1300/J045v22n03_07
- Leung, P. P., Chan, C. L., Ng, S., & Lee, M. (2009). Towards body–mind–spirit integration: East meets west in clinical social work practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 37(4), 303-311. doi: 10.1007/s10615-009-0201-9
- Martin, E. P., & Martin, J. M. (2002). *Spiritually and the black helping tradition in social work*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- National Association of Social Workers (2008). *NASW Code of Ethics*. Washington DC: Author.
- Nelson-Becker, H. B. (2003). Practical philosophies: Interpretations of religion and spirituality by African American and European American elders. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 14(2/3), 85-99.
- Pickard, J.G., & Nelson-Becker, H. (2011). Attachment and spiritual coping: Theory and practice with older adults. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 13, 138-155. doi: 10.1080/19349637.2011.565239
- Sermabeikian, P. (1994). Our clients, ourselves: The spiritual perspective and social work practice. *Social Work*, 39(2), 51-57. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/>.
- Sheridan, M. J. (2001). Defining spiritually sensitive social work practice: An essay review of spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping. *Social Work*, 46(1), 87-92.
- Sheridan, M. J., & Amato-von Hemert, K. (1999). The role of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice: A survey of student views and experiences. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 35(1), 125-141. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/62488055?accountid=12598>.

Tamika C. Baldwin, Ph.D., hails from Highland Park, Michigan and has studied and practiced social work both in the US and internationally. Her educational career included studying in Mexico, Senegal, and Ghana. She received a BA in sociology from the University of Michigan, an MSW from Michigan State University, and a PhD in social work from Morgan State University. She has worked as a social worker for older adults and adults with disabilities in London, UK and as a foster care therapist in Detroit, MI. Dr. Baldwin developed a passion for gerontology and became involved in the John A. Hartford Foundation Practicum Partnership Program for Aging, as well as, the Association for Gerontology in Social Work (AGESW) Pre-Dissertation Initiative. Dr. Baldwin has also co-authored a chapter titled "City Life: What a Wonderful Way of Life - Aging in the Urban Environment" in *The Collective Spirit of Aging Across Cultures*.

Janet N. Vaughn, PhD, born in South Carolina. She is currently a military social worker, serving in the United States Army, stationed at Ft. Carson, Colorado. Her area of specialty includes domestic violence, child abuse, gay and lesbian rights in the military, ethics, and health education. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Work from Morgan State University, an MSW from the University of South Carolina, and a BA in History from Livingstone College.

Candace M. Cotton MSW is currently a third year, PhD candidate at Morgan State University School of Social Work. She holds an MSW from the University of Maryland Baltimore, School of Social Work and BSW from University of Maryland Baltimore County.

Halaevalu F. Ofahengaue Vakalahi, PhD, is an immigrant Pacific Islander woman, born in Tonga and raised in Hawai'i. She is currently a Professor and Associate Dean in the School of Social Work at Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD. Her areas of teaching include social policy, human behavior and the social work environment, organizational leadership, and cultural diversity. Her two areas of scholarship are: Pacific Islander Culture and Community, and Women of Color in Academia. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Work and a Master's in Educational Administration from the University of Utah, an M.S.W. from the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, and a B.S. in Business Management from BYU-Hawai'i.