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Religion and Spirituality as a core module in Social Work Education in Nigeria: perspectives of social work educators

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Abstract

Religion and spirituality are central to everyday life in Nigeria. Social work educators recognize that learning cannot be separated from the influence of context, including religion and spirituality. This study presents the first empirical inquiry into religion and spirituality in social work education in Nigeria. The qualitative study explored the inclusion of religion and spirituality on Nigerian social work programs from the viewpoints of social work educators; adopting phenomenological approach. Data from key informants' semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively sampled social work educators based at three Nigerian universities (University of Nigeria, Nsukka; University of Benin, and Nnamdi Azikiwe University) were analyzed thematically. The findings highlight the importance of religion and spirituality in social work education; yet point to coverage being limited and located within elective modules, and for social work educators to recognize the relevance of religious and spiritual aspects of their students' and service users' existence in developing educational curricula. The study calls for prioritizing the integration of religion and spirituality in social work degree programs. Strengthening the links between religion, spirituality and social work will better prepare future practitioners to be cultural component and work with the profession's values of social justice.

Keywords: Spirituality and Religion; Social Work Education; Strengths-based; Cultural Social Work; Nigeria

Introduction

Cultural diversity in Nigeria is rich and complex, with religion and spirituality being central to everyday life, and religious values and practices deeply ingrained in Nigerian identities (Ayandele, Okafor & Oyedele, 2021). Nigeria has a population of 212m (World Population Review, 2021); 47% of the population identify as Christians, and 51% as Muslims,

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and 2% are adherents to African traditional religions (Ayandele et al., 2021). Religion and spirituality, are inextricably intertwined with other aspects of people's identity, leading to culture being understood in Nigeria as a way of life (Hall, 1959). Working with cultural diversity is fundamental to social work (Anand & Das, 2019), and the profession's values of social justice. 'Culturally competent' social work, Gilligan and Furness (2006:617) argue, requires practitioners to understand how religion and belief are embodied and can shape the day to day lives of service users. For Canda and Furman (2010), social work is an inherently spiritual profession, with spirituality being at the heart of social work, leading Hillary (2020) to conclude that, there is an unambiguous connection between religion, spirituality and social work. These connections are not always visible in social work education.

Studies conducted in the West have concluded that the limited coverage of religion and spirituality on social work programs is leading to students and graduates feeling unprepared for responding to religious and spiritual needs and/or understanding the significance of religion and spirituality in the lives of service users (Gilligan & Furness, 2006; Horwath & Lees, 2010). Teaching on religion has been a part of Nigerian social work programs since the first social work program was established at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in 1976 (Department of Social Work, 2015). However, these modules have been electives, not core to the program and therefore not taken by all students. This qualitative study explores the opportunities and challenges associated with teaching religion and spirituality on Nigerian social work programs.

According to the National Universities Commission (NUC) (2017:27), description of 'Spirituality and Social Work', the course is essential "to understand the total person in his environmental and cultural contexts…the implication of the combination of spirituality and social work in the areas of trauma, end of life issues, ageing, illness, cultural competence, addiction treatment, ethics, relationships, forgiveness, chronic mental illness, meaning of life,

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attempt to answer old age question of why is this happening to me and unexplainable happenings will be discussed". Religion and spirituality have been recognized as an important aspect of resilience as shared belief systems to help families to have a shared meaning of adversity. They help foster positive adaptation for social work service users in the face of adversity, such as chronic/debilitating ill health, bereavement, divorce/separation of parents, anti-social behavior of children, sudden change in the economic situation of the family, mental health disorders, disabilities, among others (Walsh, 2011). At the UNN, staff engage students in seeing religion and spirituality as important elements of assessment during interventions.

The paper first looks at religion and spirituality in social work, before narrowing the focus to religion and spirituality in social work education, and then specifically looks at religion and spirituality in Nigerian society, social work education and practice. We then move on to the study methodology and the presentation of findings under two key themes: Inclusion of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education in Nigeria, and Barriers to Inclusion of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work. We conclude the paper with some recommendations on ways to integrate religion and spirituality as a model in social work education curriculum.

Religion and Spirituality in Social Work

Crisp and Dinham (2019:11) have called for social work to be more holistic through integrating and taking 'seriously the place of spirituality as an essential element in the human condition'. To connect and build meaningful relationships with service users, requires finding ways to enter their world. Overlooking the potential role of religion and spirituality, and the ways that these provide a source of strength for people, is overlooking a central element of who they are. Cultural identity is layered, with religion and spirituality shaping lives to a lesser or greater extent depending on the religion and socio-spatial context. For social workers to understand the cultural dimensions and complexities of how religion and spirituality shape

lives involves moving 'beyond "sensitivity" to the cultural views of others' (Brydon, 2012: 160, cited in Crisp & Dinham, 2019:5), to more fully acknowledge the role of religion as a central element within multi-layered lives and identities.

Working with and integrating a religious and spiritual dimension into practice is neither straightforward nor uncomplicated. Service users, as Crisp and Dinham (2019) have highlighted, may choose not to seek support from social work if there is a question over whether their religious practices will be respected. From a practitioner perspective, Sheridan (2010) and Crisp (2017) remind us that there will be times, when social workers will be required to uphold their codes of practice and social work values to challenge the religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices of their service users. Whilst acknowledging religion and spirituality as one form of diversity that social workers may encounter, very few national Codes of Practice explicitly make reference to religion and spirituality. Those that do include; the Australian Codes of Ethics (Crisp & Dinham, 2019), and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), USA, which refers to religion and spirituality as aspects of the service users' diversity (CSWE, 2015). The Codes of Practice of the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) state that a social worker should 'work in a way that promotes diversity and respects different cultures and values' (SSSC, 2016). The Scottish Codes of Practice are an example of where the connections between religion and social work are implicit rather than explicit. In other countries, Crisp and Dinham (2019:1552) note that 'religion comes near the end, of a long list of factors contributing to diversity'.

Social work is underpinned by a broad strengths-based perspective (Bhagwan, 2013), with an emphasis on identifying and drawing on inherent strengths and resources of service users and within their family and communities, along with their environment and cultural contexts for intervention. Core elements of a strengths-based approach are that everyone has strengths and capacities. People can change and grow through their strengths and capacities,

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and social workers can support people to see and use their strengths, for engaging with them and to solve their problems (Pulla, 2017). A strength-based perspective enables and encourages the centring of the strengths and resources of service users (Mendenhall & Carney, 2020). Within the context of this paper, we argue that people draw strength from religion and spirituality making them indispensable resources in social work practice that contribute to building resilience and achieving change (Bhagwan, 2011; Pandya, 2015; Ebimgbo, Agwu, & Okoye, 2017).

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Dominelli (2017:193) is clear, 'I want the curriculum to reflect practice using indigenous knowledge, particularly the way in which it sees the holism between the person and their environment, including spirituality'. In some countries this appears to be happening, the 'Australian entry-level professional social work education recognizes that social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, spiritual and physical environments' (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020:12). In a Canadian study on religion and spirituality in social work pedagogy, Kvarfordt, Sheridan and Taylor (2017) explored the views of 190 Canadian educators in an online national survey. The authors noted that their findings suggest an overall favorable view towards religion/spirituality in social work practice, and general support for including content on the topic within social work educational programs. However, their findings also revealed that only one-third of the participants reported that such content is included in undergraduate or postgraduate social work curriculum, and that the greatest concerns about the inclusion of the content were the possibility of educators or students presenting their biases. In Gilligan and Furness' (2006:619) study on the views and experiences of British social work students and practitioners on the role of religion and spirituality in practice, they found that religion and spirituality had 'very rarely been explored with them in their training'. Gilligan and Furness (2006) highlighted that this was in contrast to previous

work in the USA, including findings from Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert's (1999) American survey, which was one of the first to explore the social work curriculum and practice and preparedness for working with religion and spirituality. Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert's (1999) found in relation to participants' social work education, 54% agreed their curriculum 'Rarely', and 2% 'Often' covered religion and spirituality.

Crisp and Dinham (2019) note that the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education, has tended to focus on the ways that it can support working with specific user groups rather than how it impacts and shapes lives more generally. The areas of practice commonly associated with religion and spirituality are: end of life care and bereavement; substance misuse; and work with migrants and refugees (Crisp & Dinham, 2019). In assessing spirituality in social work pedagogy among eight social work educators and 10 students in Canada, Coholic (2006) noted that the findings support the need to become more intentional about including spirituality in social work pedagogy. Limited coverage of religion and spirituality in social work education is leading students and graduates to feel unprepared (Horwath & Lees, 2010) for responding to the religious and spiritual needs of service users and/or understanding the significance of religion and spirituality in shaping everyday lives. There have been clear calls for social work education to move on from 'inconsistent preparation for spiritually competent work' (Sheridan et al., 1994; Canda, 1998; Canda & Furman 1999; Canda et al., 2004; Gilligan & Furness, 2006; Dominelli, 2017; Crisp, 2017).

Pandya (2015) examined perspectives on including spirituality in the social work curriculum among 1,084 social work educators from six South Asian countries. Results from the study revealed that the educators differed in their perspectives regarding the level of course introduction (undergraduate or postgraduate), the nature of the course (optional or compulsory), and the curriculum content (evidence-based or experiential). Other studies have found that students think teaching on religion and spirituality should be an elective, rather than

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a core module (Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999; Furness, 2003; Gilligan, 2003). Hillary's (2020) work introduced a conceptual model on integrating religion and spirituality content into social work education through, infusing spirituality and religion content into existing core courses or developing a separate elective course on spirituality and religion in practice. The latter allows for devoting more time to teaching the content and provides students with a deeper understanding of the content and requisite skills for practice with diverse service users. Hilary's (2020) study also noted that some educators argued in favour of combining the two models in the form of teaching the content as an introductory core course, and teaching it at a deeper level as an elective course later on to facilitate students' understanding of spirituality-social work relationship.

From a South African perspective, Bhagwan (2011) explored educators' views about and experiences of spirituality at a personal level, in practice and pedagogy, using interviews and focus group with 21 South African social work practitioners. The study found that almost all the participants concurred that spirituality was important in pedagogy based on 1) Blending of South African pedagogy with cultural diversity and spirituality which manifests within cultures. 2) Spirituality is considered as an integral component of the holistic perspective given that humans have a spiritual essence. 3) Educators' spirituality is a source of strength. In a follow up study, Bhagwan (2013) re-examined the same subject matter in South Africa using a national survey involving 66 educators from 16 universities. Once again, the study findings point to participants indicating positive views on spirituality in social work education and practice.

Much of the literature on religion and spirituality in social work has presented a Western paradigm, dominated by the English speaking world, primarily the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. This, as Holloway (2014:123) articulates, 'does not reflect the spiritualities of the rest of the world and there is much to learn from other traditions. For example, highlighted

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are communitarian values and the privileging of connectiveness over self-actualisation; paying attention to the environment as sacred and our connections with our environments; and an explicit rejection of the Western notion of 'spiritual but not religious' as counter-cultural in many parts of the world'. This paper explicitly addresses this lacunae, and we now turn our attention to Nigeria, to socio-spatially contextualise this study.

Religion and Spirituality in Nigerian Society, Social Work Education and Practice

Given the common Nigerian expression of faith and belief systems in virtually all areas of society, including schooling, sports, security, healthcare (Ebimgbo et al., 2017; Olowolagba, 2018; Reuben et al., 2020), social work practice that is spiritually sensitive can thrive. This paper uses Paul's (2010) and Ohaja, Murphy-Lawless and Dunlea's (2019) perspectives on religion and spirituality, which portray the concepts as reflective of people's affiliations, a source of affirmation of human value and dignity, and the practice of embedding values and sense of assurance through constant communion with a supernatural being. This perspective resonates within the Nigerian context and the role of religion and spirituality in engendering a sense of strength and resilience, but requires indigenous/localized interpretation for effective practice. The significance of this is reflected in there having been a module on religion since the first social work program was established in Nigeria, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1976.

In Nigeria, the central philosophy of the NUC (2017) Benchmark Minimum Academic Standard (BMAS) for undergraduate social work degree programs is to produce graduates equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills in the solution of social problems. Irrespective of spirituality and religion being integral in the everyday life of Nigerians and the values deeply ingrained in Nigerian identities, the concepts are marginalized in social work education. The NUC (2017) BMAS for social work degree programs in Nigerian universities states that

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'spirituality and social work practice is only an elective course in the second semester of the 3rd year level of a Bachelor of Social Work program', with many of the undergraduate students choosing not to take the course. Ebonyi State University of Science and Technology (EBSU), Abakaliki, is an exception, it has a core course on religion and spirituality. With the aforementioned importance of spirituality and religion to Nigerians, and given the goal of ensuring that social work education and practice is context-specific, exposing students to a course on spirituality only as an elective may not be sufficient to garner the appropriate knowledge and skills to effectively work with service users.

Similar to the observation of Hill and Pargament (2003), the scenario in Nigeria shows that increased participation in some aspects of religious activities including prayers, reading scriptures, listening to sermons and singing, reverencing of ancestral spirits and sacrificing to different African deities (Ebimgbo et al., 2017) is associated with a great sense of meaning and hope which may help to enhance individuals' psychological wellbeing and coping with stresses of life (Agli, Bailly & Ferrand, 2014). Other Nigerian examples of the role of religion and spirituality in social work, are located in the nexus of health and social work. Agbawodikeizu, Agwu and Okoye (2018) have highlighted that beliefs, religious and spiritual rituals (such as oath taking in African traditional religion) remain significant for end-of-life issues, settling family disputes, expressing proof of claims and coping with terminal illnesses. Ayandele et al. (2021) and Ebimgbo, Atumah and Okoye (2018) have found that local networks, such as faith-based organizations and church-based organizations, have been helpful in meeting the financial, healthcare and other basic needs of some Nigerians. Additionally, Ebimgbo et al. (2017) have noted that health workers within Nigeria; while attending to their patients, many say, 'we only treat but God heals', and in some cases recommend that spiritualists and religious clerics be contacted. There is scope for further developing work that integrates the importance of religious and spiritual beliefs in the lives of service users, and

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using the concepts in responding to social problems. Ebimgbo et al. (2017) offer a note of caution, highlighting that some practitioners turn down cases and make referrals due to the incompatibility in religion and spiritual beliefs.

Ayandele et al. (2021) explored a different perspective on the discourse regarding religion and spirituality in social work pedagogy by assessing the role of religion in tackling social problems such as health crises in Nigeria. The authors reported that religion has continued to play an important role in Nigeria and is deep rooted in the citizens' national identity as they anchor their hopes, solution to their problems and protection against health crises on their faith.

Evident in this literature is that findings from other countries reveal a recognition of the influence of religion and spirituality in social work education. The literature also revealed the increased attention social work educators have given to the inclusion of religion and spirituality among the core courses in social work curriculum, and offered models on how to achieve such inclusion. The result from Nigerian context shows the role of religion and the relevance ascribed to it in solving social problems. Thus, the question of the role of religion within different contexts and the significance of its inclusion in social work education curriculum is highlighted.

This paper presents findings on perspectives about the relevance of religion and spirituality, the priority given to the inclusion of the concepts within core course requirement in social work pedagogy from the viewpoints of Nigerian based educators. The questions that guided the study include:

1) Is religion and spirituality sufficiently covered in social work curriculum?

2) Should the concepts of religion and spirituality be incorporated into existing core courses in social work curriculum?

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3) What are the anticipated challenges in moving courses on spirituality and social work in Nigerian social work programs from being electives to core courses?

Materials and methods

This qualitative study adopted the descriptive phenomenological approach, and used key informant interviewing (KII) to collect data from social work educators in three universities offering social work programs in Nigeria: UNN, Enugu State; UNIBEN, Benin-City, Edo State; and UNIZIK, Awka, Anambra State. Phenomenology focuses on investigating and making meaning of research participants' lived experiences from their perspectives and interpretations "as they make sense of them" (Manen, 2018). Descriptive phenomenology field research design was adopted as it allowed the researchers to make sense of the informants' perception of their everyday world (Schutz, 1967; 1970).

Key informant interviewing to gather qualitative data from key people who have experience in relation to a particular phenomenon (Bernard, 2006:191; Dawson, 2009), for this study, teaching spirituality, religion and social work. Key informants are people who know a lot about their culture and are, for reasons of their own, willing to share all their knowledge…. people whom one can talk to easily, who understand the information needed, and who are glad to give it out or get it for people, while specialized informants have particular competence in some cultural domain, for instance studies focusing on describing what best practice should be adopted in a particular situation, or what herb tea to give children for diarrhoea, need to talk to people who can speak knowledgeably about those things (Bernard, 2006:196).

The three oldest universities offering social work programs were selected for inclusion in the study out of the 22 that offer social work programs. The UNN, pioneered social work education in Nigeria, establishing the first program in 1976. It began in 1976/1977 with an undergraduate diploma program, in 1984/1985 an undergraduate degree program was

introduced, and from 1986/1987 postgraduate programs (PG Diploma, MSc, and PhD) were included. Social work units were established in 1979 at UNIBEN, and in 1985 at UNIZIK.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was adopted in selecting 12 social work educators (four each) from the three universities. The researchers applied a discriminate procedure in selecting the study participants given the need to be deliberate about who to sample to obtain the needed data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A sample size of 12 is suitable for a qualitative study and in-depth narratives. The criteria for inclusion in the study, to facilitate for diverse perspectives, was: length of appointment as a social work academic; educational level (M.Sc. and Ph.D. completed); and current position (senior and junior lecturers). To select the study participants, the research team contacted colleagues in UNN to recruit participants from UNIBEN and UNIZIK. The researchers emphasized gender mix in the mobilization to ensure representativeness of both males and females in the study. A total of 38 educators were contacted and an invitation, participant information sheet about the study and consent form, were sent to the educators through their work email addresses. Twelve educators consented and scheduled the dates, time and venue for the interviews. The information sheet informed the participants about the purpose of the study, how they were selected, their right to withdraw participation or responding to any questions, and the confidentiality and anonymity associated with reporting of the findings.

A semi-structured KII guide was used for data collection. The guide included questions and prompts on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education. Prompts were included on the priority given to the concepts among the core contents of social work pedagogy; that is, how much the educators were integrating indigenous religious beliefs and practices into social work educational contents, as well as questions on the anticipated challenges in moving course content on spirituality and social work in the social work programs from being an elective to a core module.

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The interviews were conducted in English and were tape-recorded. The research team conducted the KIIs while a research assistant took notes on key points uttered by the participants to back-up the recording in case of technical failure. Each of the interviews lasted between 45–60 minutes. Data collection lasted for two weeks, from the first to the second weeks of March 2020. Face-to-face interaction was adopted at the time of the interviews as COVID-19 safety guidelines and orders including movement restrictions and lockdown orders were yet to be implemented in Nigeria. The interviews took place at the venues and time chosen by the key informants.

The audio-recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the research team to ensure full coverage of the dataset for better quality analysis. The transcripts were double-checked by the research team to ensure quality and consistency. The data were analyzed manually and in themes including observing stages of familiarisation, coding, indexing and interpretation. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Review Board of the department of Psychology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (ref: xxx/20/IRB-0000-030).

Results

Twelve educators participated in this study and they comprised three females and nine males. The length of service of the majority of the participants was over 10 years, only two had been a social work academic for less than five years. All the participants had a Master's degree, and eight a doctorate in social work. Five held senior roles, while the rest held junior lecturer roles. Only four of the educators (three from UNN and one from UNIBEN) had taught courses related to religion and spirituality.

The two key themes to emerge from the analysis that are covered in this paper are:

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Barriers to inclusion of religion and spirituality in Social Work.

Inclusion of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education in Nigeria

Results from the study revealed that the educators acknowledged and indicated the significant roles religion and spirituality play in social work education, and advocated for the inclusion of its content in social work education in Nigeria. Regarding the role of the contents in social work pedagogy, one of the participants said:

Social work educators in Nigeria are also Nigerians and are mostly religious and spiritual. Many of them attribute students' ability to learn, understand, perform well in exam and succeed in the practice of social work to help from God **(P5- Male, Junior cadre)**.

Also, the participants pointed out the role religion and spirituality play in practice to include the provision of a basis for understanding the service users' emotion and preferences as they tend to make meanings from occurrences based on their religious and spiritual consciousness. The participants believed that social work professionals can be most successful in working with service users when they respect their religious inclination and beliefs, especially in the African context. A focus on religion and spirituality supports self-help, independence, responsibility for one another and the society. Therefore, spirituality and religious competence must be emphasized in training social workers.

Religion and spirituality in the life of our service users help them to inculcate self-help, independence, responsibility for one another as people cannot do without each other. It further reminds them of their responsibilities to the survival of the entire society. **(P9- Male, Senior cadre)**

The participants reflected on connections between religion and a strengths-based approach, highlighting that the content enables the service users to build resilience when faced

with difficult situations and offers them hope for success. This was mirrored in their recognition of a supernatural being that can help in solving their problems, and can moderate their behavior. Coverage of religion and spirituality was further considered as an integral aspect of principles and ethics, they argued that people who considered themselves religious, spiritual, and moral will likely practice with the guidance of principles and ethics of the social work profession.

Spirituality and religion help our service users build resilience when they are faced with helpless situations. They believe they can only leave it in the hands of God. Furthermore, in situations that they can change, they still believe that with the help of God they can succeed. The guilt presented by spirituality and religion can also help them decide to start making positive changes in their lives. **(P2- Male, Senior cadre)**.

All the participants were unanimous in their support and promotion of inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education curriculum for a standard degree program in their universities. Also indicated alongside their support were reasons for their opinions. One of the participants mentioned that "Nigerians are notoriously religious" and as such, social workers should have a good understanding of how to practice with the religious population. Another participant stated that any teaching that does not have a bearing with religion and spirituality may not yield meaningful learning. Participants also mentioned that educational content should enable graduates of social work to acquire the knowledge to recognize the significance attached to religion by service users, and utilise such as a strength geared toward achieving the goals of their intervention.

Yes, I support it (inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education) because, as I said earlier, Nigerians are notoriously religious, thus every social worker should have a good understanding of how to approach practising with this religious population and the ethical issues that may arise in practice **(P5- Male, Junior cadre)**.

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> *Yes, it (inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education) should. This (inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education) would ensure that graduates of social work acquire the skill of utilizing the religious and spiritual consciousness of their service users as a positive means toward achieving the goals of their professional relationships* **(P10- Female, Senior cadre)**.

Given the undeniable significance of religion and spirituality in the lives of Nigerians, unpacking the narratives above reveals that for social work education in an indigenous Nigerian context to be complete and to produce competent social workers, spirituality and religion most be core in the curriculum. Educating social workers on religion and spirituality will improve religious tolerance amongst social workers in Nigeria, a country where religious tolerance is a challenge; improve acceptance of religious diversity of service users; and inculcate the spirit of respect for individual religious orientations, which will ultimately produce better social workers.

Barriers to inclusion of religion and spirituality in Social Work

The participants were asked about the barriers to the inclusion of religion and spirituality among the core modules in the social work education curriculum. Some of them mentioned that the multi-religious nature of Nigerian society was one important barrier and advocated for localizing social work education. In the view of one of the participants,

> *When we decide to localise social work in Nigeria, we will then, have to put spirituality and religion in the core of social work pedagogy because the average Nigerian citizen is spiritual and religious.* **(P4- Male, Junior cadre)**.

Also observed was that religion and spirituality have not been given adequate attention to ensure that the curriculum does not seem like it is meant for a particular religion. This may be because religion is at the centre of the lives of Nigerians and social work educators may get

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carried away and personalize it, focusing all the discourse on their own religion. Only one participant indicated that the educational content is subjective and unscientific in approach. This is because social work pedagogy in Nigeria is still aligned with the Eurocentric and westernized model. The participants equally recommended approaches to be utilized to deal with the barriers they identified. Expressions of the participants are illustrated in the following quotes:

> *One important barrier is the multi-religious nature of Nigerian society. So, it just seems like that aspect of religion and spirituality is just not given adequate attention for the curriculum not to seem like it is mainly for one religious sect. It would be helpful if the department can consult with adherents of religions other than Christianity, to identify ways in which their religious tenets fit into the ideals of the social work profession. These could then be incorporated into the social work education curriculum.* **(P7- Female, Junior cadre)**.

> *A major barrier is that it is subjective and unscientific in approach. A tip on how it can be sustained is that it has to be treated as a sensitive issue and not scientific. Sensitive issues can aid learning in a broad sense. Again, though it is not scientific in a strict sense, it rules and moderates behavior which is important in human relationships.* **(P8-Male, Junior cadre)**.

Discussion

Findings in this study are discussed here under three key themes: Inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education curriculum; Support for inclusion of religion and spirituality among the core courses in social work curriculum; and Role of religion and spirituality in social work education/practice.

This study has established that given social work's emphasis on using a strengths-based perspective, religion and spirituality are included in social work education in Nigeria, although

courses are an elective rather than core, other than at one university. Findings highlight localizing social work education in Nigeria. Specifically, localizing content on religion and spirituality in order to incorporate traditional and indigenous elements such as oath taking (Agbawodikeizu et al., 2018), and anchoring hopes, solution to problems and protection against health crises on faith (Ayandele et al., 2021) that are of high value to their service users in providing an appropriate response to their problems. This entails filling the existing dearth of evidence on the priority given to religion and spirituality in social work education and practice in Nigeria.

The study calls for the inclusion of religion and spirituality as core courses in social work curriculum, and by implication, current coverage of religion and spirituality are insufficient in the curriculum (Coholic, 2006; Kvarfordt et al., 2017; Bhagwan, 2011 & 2013), and limited to those choosing an elective on the topic. Also, while participants in this study supported using religion and spirituality as an intervention method and a source of strength (to service users), those in Bhagwan's (2011) study offered three broad rationales for the consideration of spirituality in practice. The rationales as referred include: blending of South African pedagogy with cultural diversity and spirituality; spirituality is considered as an integral component of the holistic perspective given that humans have a spiritual essence; and educators' spirituality is a source of strength. Social work educators are therefore expected to put into consideration the general support given to incorporating a course on religion, spirituality and social work into compulsory courses, and enable students to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively across religious and spiritual differences.

The findings from the study, just as those of Bhagwan (2011), show the perceived roles religion and spirituality play in social work education, the lives of social workers and their service users. Additionally, participants in this study and those in Bhagwan's (2011) referred to religion and spirituality as an integral component of human existence. Participants in this

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study perceived religion as a source of strength (external) to service users, which contrasts with educators' spirituality being the source of strength in their helping relationships (Bhagwan, 2011). Given this finding, social work educators should be recognizing the relevance of the overall religious and spiritual component of their students' and service users' existence, as well as the diversity in their religious and spiritual perspectives in developing educational curricula in that regard.

This study found that service users are perceiving and utilising religion and spirituality as a source of strength that is external to both them and their social worker. This understanding of a strengths-based approach contests a Western perspective, and introduces an alternative, the Nigerian/African interpretation. An indigenous model which builds on how social workers can work with religion and spirituality as an external source of strength.

Lastly, this study shows that for social work educators to indigenize social work education in Africa, there is a need to move beyond a Western model to an Afrocentric model which recognizes the great importance of collectivism, spirituality, religion, and indigenous knowledge (Levy, Okoye & Ingram, 2022). In, an effort to do this, we must be more critical with our approach to objectivity, and recognize the shortfalls of using Western scientific models in an African context.

The researchers acknowledge a couple of limitations of this study. First, was not including Ebonyi State University of Science and Technology which offers Spirituality and Social Work as a core course. This only came to the fore by the time the study had been concluded. Second, this is limited to the experiences and perspectives of those who volunteered to participate, and could have benefited from hearing from other social work educators who choose not to participate. This may not rule out the possibility that they did not believe in the concepts (religion and spirituality), and/or were not in support of the incorporation of the

content in the curriculum. Notwithstanding, these limitations, the findings of the study remain valid.

Conclusion

This study presents the first empirical inquiry into religion and spirituality in social work education content in Nigeria. The study suggests two ways to progress with integrating more content on religion and spirituality into social work curriculum. First, as a core course; and second, by infusing spirituality and religion content into an introductory course on core contents, and teaching it at a deeper level as an elective course. Both approaches will strengthen religious/spiritual sensitivity in the helping process and better prepare social work professionals to be sensitive to ethical issues (such as respect for diversity and values) that are ever present in their practice environments.

Further research in this area is needed to add evidence to this initial study, and to help establish and broaden holistic social work education and practice in Nigeria. Expanding the scope of this study to include more universities offering social work programs, and views of more social work educators, as well as those of the students, is recommended to progress understanding. Another area that requires further/deeper investigation is exploring how social work practitioners in different environments can work with people when the source of their strength is external to both the social worker and the service user.

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