

SEXUAL TRAUMA & SPIRITUALITY: EXPERIENCES OF THE THERAPIST

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Abstract

Although qualitative and quantitative research supports the use of spirituality in the counselling process, there is a lack of awareness regarding how it is understood, interpreted, experienced, and utilized. This is especially true in therapy addressing sexual trauma. The purpose of this study is to explore therapists' experience of spirituality in therapy addressing sexual trauma. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach, 6 themes emerged including, (1) pathways to spirituality, (2) language is limiting as spirituality is experiential, (3) connection within many contexts, (4) therapists were personally and professionally impacted, (5) the therapeutic process itself as spiritual, and (6) a stance of not knowing was identified.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, Sexual trauma, Sexual Violence, Spirituality, Counselling, Therapy

Introduction

Sexual violence is a common experience in North American society. To illustrate this, we only need to consider that 39% of Canadian women experience sexual violence after the age of 16 (Statistics Canada, 2006) and 1 in 6 males experience some form of sexual violence at some point in their lives (Halton Region, n.d). Trauma has a strong disruptive effect, and when sexual violence occurs in childhood, there are often developmental disruptions, in the cognitive, psychological, and spiritual domains (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Parker, Horton, & Watson, 1997). Development may be arrested at the age of when the abuse occurred (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996) which may compromise wellness and the development of a secure and independent sense of self (Parker et al., 1997). However, sexual violence can occur at any point in one's life and other impacts include difficulty trusting self and others, low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, shame, isolation and fear, shattered world views and perspectives, feelings of not belonging, suicidal thoughts (Crisp, 2012); feelings of hopelessness, questions of meaning and purpose of abuse, difficulty trusting a Higher Power, rigid thinking, feeling the world is not safe, and feeling unworthy and unlovable (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996). It is evident that all aspects of a person can be impacted by the perpetration of sexual violence.

The healing journey can take many forms but one of the most common approaches is by attending counselling. Although not the only path of healing, it is certainly one of the most socially recognized in North American society. Most often when individuals attend therapy, they do so because they are not functioning at an optimal level; research has demonstrated, those who seek assistance often suffer less severe long-term impacts (Postmus, Severson, Berry, & Yoo, 2009).

One of the hopes in therapy is to restore wellness and balance. Striving towards balance requires an acknowledgment that individuals are complex and multidimensional. This would support the recognition of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person and this can be considered in terms of impact of trauma as well as coping and wellness. There has been a considerable amount of research exploring the emotional, physical, and psychological impacts of sexual violence on a person. However, less attention has been paid to how sexual trauma affects one's spirituality despite the undeniable impact following the violation of a person's body and mind (Crisp, 2012; Ganji-Fling & McCarthy, 1996).

This may be partly due to the complexity of defining and understanding spirituality. Its broad and universal nature provides a fertile ground to explore the many perspectives and perceptions held by individuals. Although spirituality and religion are often discussed together, they are independent of each other. Spirituality may be a component of religion but is broader, more inclusive, and captures experiences outside of religion (Canda, 2010). One such understanding of spirituality describes it as a "universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, wellbeing, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others, and ultimate reality, however understood" (Canda, 2010, p. 59).

Many others share this belief of spirituality as a universal human experience (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Crisp, 2012). Although there are many definitions of spirituality, after a large scale review, Carroll (1998) found three commonalities amongst them, a) there is a holistic quality which cannot be reduced to any part of a person, b) there is an aspect concerned with meaning, morality, and a relationship with a higher power, and c) transpersonal experiences which go beyond the body and ego of a person (Canda, 2010). These three components provide a

foundation for discussion of spirituality within diverse arenas, including within a therapeutic process.

Within the context of therapy addressing sexual violence, spirituality plays an important role. Postmus et al. (2009) found that out of the top 10 most helpful services provided to female survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence, religious/spiritual counselling ranked as number 2; however in terms of use, it was ranked as number 10. Interestingly, they found professional counselling ranked as number 13 for helpfulness but number 1 for rank of use. When viewed closely, there is a common thread woven throughout spirituality and healing of sexual trauma. Parker et al. (1997) insist that addressing spiritual issues in addition to psychological issues, is necessary in healing the impacts associated with sexual trauma. Concepts of power, trust, control and transformation (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996), as well as meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation, and transcendence (Crisp, 2012) are not only areas impacted by sexual violence, they are also components of spirituality. Exploring the various types of therapies utilized in trauma therapy is beyond the scope of this paper, but in drawing on seminal work by Herman (1992), Parker et al. (1997) purpose that healing from sexual violence must address the question “why?” They contend that through his meaning-making experience and exploring feelings of anger, guilt, and shame, suffering is given meaning and transformed.

Previous research supports the use of spirituality in counselling, with both counsellors and clients in favor of its inclusion. However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding how it is understood, interpreted, experienced, and utilized. This is especially true in therapy addressing sexual trauma. Morrison, Clutter, Pritchett, and Demmitt (2009) provide a look into counsellor’s perceptions of spirituality within counselling and Postmus et al. (2009) provide support for spiritual counselling in trauma therapy from a client’s perspective; however, the perspective of

sexual violence counsellors regarding spirituality in therapy is absent. This study seeks to explore how sexual trauma counsellors understand and experience spirituality in the therapeutic process.

Lastly, a note on language is necessary. Throughout this paper, the terms sexual violence and sexual trauma are used interchangeably. Further, the use of the word “survivor” in this paper, is used for sake of flow. I appreciate the use of person first language, such as “a person who has experienced sexual violence” but have resolved to use the term “survivor” to identify those impacted by sexual violence due to the aforementioned reason.

Method

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of spirituality; this is done through the lens of a constructivist paradigm. The goal is not to ascertain a single truth, nor to only seek commonalities among participants, but to gain an awareness of individual participants’ realities and truths, which are constructed historically and socially by his and her interaction with others (Creswell, 2013). Situating this research within a constructivist stance allows for multiple realities to emerge and space for the meaning each participant has given to this phenomenon.

Although the desire was to elicit the experiences of each therapist, it cannot be ignored that my influence is infused throughout the study, beginning with choosing a research topic of professional and personal interest to me, to engaging in candid conversation throughout the interviews, to developing themes and selecting specific quotes and comments from the transcripts. I entered this endeavor with the understanding that I wear several hats: therapist, social work student, life-long learner, and researcher. It is with this understanding that knowledge is seen as a complex, subjective, meaning-making experience, from which I cannot be separated from but rather take up a position of co-constructor.

Recruitment and Participants

This study seeks to explore a phenomenon within a specific population; therefore purposive selection of participants was utilized. Purposive selection strategically seeks participants who met certain criteria (Maxwell, 2013); in this case, participants had to be currently working with at least one client who has experienced sexual violence at some point in his or her life. However, the focus of this study was on clients who are now adults so therapists working with youth were not eligible to participate. Participants were recruited through private practice offices and various agencies providing counselling service to people who have experienced sexual violence. Posters were sent to these agencies and distributed among staff who were able to self-select and participate on their own time if they were interested. Surprisingly, word of mouth recruitment also occurred. There was an overlap between recruitment and data collection, resulting in participants who had engaged in the interview process, informing other colleagues of this research project. As these therapists have an ongoing, intimate experience with the phenomenon of spirituality within sexual trauma, they may be considered experiential experts, thus lending to intensity sampling (Palys & Atkinson, 2008).

Five individuals participated in this study. Participants were given the opportunity to self-identify various aspects of themselves. The sample of participants included 3 females and 2 males between the ages of 29-45 years old. Four participants were currently working in a non-profit setting, one was working in a non-profit setting and private practice, and one was in private practice and a research position. To protect confidentiality, participants' names are not shared; rather, they are given numbers one through five to indicate ownership of the quotes incorporated throughout the paper. Education and training backgrounds were diverse as were client caseload characteristics.

Data Generation and Analysis

Data generation occurred through interviews between 60-120 minutes in length. These interviews mostly occurred at the offices of the participants, with the exception of 2 interviews, of which one occurred via telephone and one occurred in a library space. The interview format was semi-structured and conversational in nature with several prepared open-ended questions to guide and facilitate the process. These questions were broad so that participants could construct their own meaning (Creswell, 2013). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. I transcribed four interviews and one was sent to a transcription service due to the length of the interview and time constraints.

A qualitative descriptive approach is best when straight description of phenomena is the goal, such as the purpose of this study (Sandelowski, 2000). Consistent with this approach, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously as preliminary analysis of one interview has the potential to inform subsequent interviews and provide insight into the quality of questions. Through this process, modification of one particular question did occur for the remaining interviews. In an attempt to stay true to the participant's described experiences, a content analysis approach was utilized. This analysis method is a low inference approach which allows for a summary of participants' experience and generates codes from the data rather than applying a pre-determined set of codes (Sandelowski, 2000). Adhering to a conventional content analysis approach, transcripts were read several times as a whole before moving on to coding repeating ideas and eventually sorted into descriptive themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These themes were organized and presented using the Rashomon effect in which the same event is described by multiple participants (Sandelowski, 2000).

Validity

The participants are the heart of this study; it is their experiences which provide the rich insight into spirituality within sexual trauma therapy. To honor this, direct quotes are utilized to provide a deep description of categorical findings. Endeavoring to represent participant experiences is not enough; due to the subjective nature of analysis in qualitative data, elements may be misinterpreted. Member checking or respondent validation is the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126-127). Preliminary findings were provided to each participant in an effort to identify whether themes fit with his or her experiences. Four of the participants responded, each indicating feelings of satisfaction with the themes.

Although each therapist is working within a similar context, each practiced in various settings. This triangulation allows for reduced risk of systemic biases and associations (Maxwell, 2013).

Results

Six themes emerged when I analyzed how the participants experienced spirituality: identifying pathways to access spirituality, spirituality as experiential, connection within various contexts, impact on the therapist, the counselling process itself as spiritual, and a stance of not knowing. Although the themes are written in a way which separates them from each, they are not completely independent and continue to inform each other.

Pathways

Each participant discussed meeting the client where they were in terms of his or her spiritual beliefs and being cautious to not push his or her own ideas and spiritual practices onto the client. However, participants identified utilizing various pathways to access or actively

engage with the spiritual aspect within the counselling session. Some had a cultural element such as using smudging and drumming. Others recognized the use of religion as a way of connecting spiritually such as reading bible verses and praying.

It was healing through our values and so each week we had a different value and based on our spiritual belief system and our teachings, so this is all again spirituality cause it's connected to culture and you can't really separate the two. So each week, we would journal about a value, either write about it or draw pictures, everybody had a nice book, they could collage, they could do whatever they wanted but we all had to do whatever the value was, so respect, honor, gratitude (Participant 4)

There were also certain activities that were seen as helping to connect to spirituality. Several participants identified not necessarily labeling the activities as spiritual, so as not to label the client's experience for them; however, the participants considered the identified activities as having a spiritual component. This included using silence, ceremony, rituals, discussing spiritual beliefs, visualization, groups, art, humor, meditation, singing, and mindfulness.

I think silence is one of the powerful tools that I use that allows for the space for spirituality to emerge in therapy (Participant 1)

The other aspect to spirituality in terms of the counselling work is when you take away the religion is things like some of the techniques we use for relaxation and for grounding. I find a lot of them very spiritual in nature, things like visualization, things like mindfulness and meditation, they are all things that involve accessing more than your cognitive self but accessing the stillness, accessing this ability to just be at peace. Which I find a very spiritual thing for people to do whether they are

associating it with some kind of a higher power or just their own, getting in touch with their own inner self (Participant 3)

I see mindfulness as a practice that stretches across various different spiritual traditions (Participant 1)

Because I mean, ritual is a big part of spirituality, so sometimes clients need to have a lot of ritual in their lives around the sexual trauma that's happened. So they might have to do things around cleansing, for example (Participant 4)

Experiential

At some point during each interview, participants expressed difficulty in articulating spirituality, recognizing that language is often limiting and cannot capture the richness of the experience. When words are utilized, they often had an experiential connotation.

But you know witnessing somebody shift because of a song, that is very spiritual, you know. Is, it's incredible, like you can't, it's hard to have words to describe that, other than it's useful and effective, you know what I mean? Like, some things you can't actually articulate (Participant 4)

I have a client who calls it (...) I'm like alright, whatever works, right? And when she talks about it, she knows exactly what she's talking about and I know what she's talking about so I don't feel like it's my place to name that for her (Participant 5)

I use words like being, I use words like isolation, meaning, belonging, belonging in the world, belonging in part to others, belonging in part to others, belonging in part to oneself, sorts of idea, being part of the greater picture, being a part of something bigger than oneself, that's kind of really the, sometimes I speak as to sort of, feeling an energy around people (Participant 2)

However, even when words cannot capture the depth of the experience, participants identified using other ways of communicating, providing space for, and viewing spirituality through an experiential lens.

I'm always keenly aware of what the body is doing, because sometimes the body expresses things that words can't, right? (Participant 1)

I think that people who have been abused, especially abused children, don't trust themselves and don't trust what that true voice within them has to say to them and so they learn to block it out. So learning to listen and sit with that and be able to access where that feeling is in their body, what it feels like, what it feels like when it's connected, when it's not connected can be helpful too I think (Participant 5)

And so when you are talking about spirituality, I think emotional experience is very spiritual whether they see it or not. I think it is for a lot of people a very spiritual experience (Participant 3)

I think spirituality also comes out in the unique way that you work with people, or it can as long as it's not squashed down (Participant 5)

Everyone is unique and that, I think, when you get to the root of spirituality it's the uniqueness of individual experience (Participant 3)

We would talk about spirituality and culture and ceremony and life and being and existence and nature and it was just a part of everything we did (Participant 4)

Connection

Connection was a reoccurring theme among all participants and was presented within various contexts. This connection was discussed in relation to self and various aspects of self, others, and ideas. Participants recognized that trauma has the ability to prevent or disrupt this

connection and that part of the healing process often includes exploration of reconnection.

Although each therapist discussed connection in some manner, Participant 5 drew heavily on this theme in her overall understanding and experience of spirituality in the therapeutic process.

So over the years, what spirituality has come to be for me is about connection. And so it's like, I do feel that all living things, nature, animals, people are all connected on some level. Some basis. And that you know, all people have this core within them that you know, connects us all to each other. So spirituality for me is about that connection; connecting to nature, connecting to animals, connecting to others, and getting in touch with that core of ourselves as well (Participant 5)

I think that we can recover our sense of self, that we can recover our relationships with others, and our ability to be in relationship with others or the way we are in relationship with others. I think we can recover a connection, we can recover a sense of trust in, if this is your spiritual belief, you know, you can recover a sense of connection with a higher power or something like that. Like if you belief in god or something like that, you can recover that relationship, right. You can recover a way of being in the world. I think you can recover parts of self that have been lost or cut off (Participant 1)

I enjoyed helping individuals who had experienced sexual trauma rediscover their bodies and reclaim their sex lives (Participant 3)

We think we are just physical beings or these mental beings or these emotional beings or these spiritual beings. It's all connected (Participant 4)

Because the thing that we forget, often, is that in a lot of cultures, spirituality and culture are not necessarily synonymous, but they're so strongly connected, that you

can't really talk about being culturally competent without acknowledging people's spiritual beliefs and practices (Participant 4)

I like humor and no, it's not appropriate with every client, but I think it can be a huge connecting force with a lot of clients, and I think that that connection is about spirituality (Participant 5)

Although connection is an important element in healing, so is a sense of boundaries and containment. The incorporation of boundary work was noted as an important element in the counselling process. Participant 2 highlighted the lack of boundaries during times of abuse and described that clients may not have a sense of separation of self from the abuser or the abuse.

A lot of boundary work. So understanding like, where does one's physical boundaries, financial boundaries, emotional boundaries, spiritual boundaries, ideological boundaries, all those sorts of ideas as to what boundaries mean (Participant 2)

Impact on Therapist

Each therapist identified being personally and professionally impacted by incorporating spirituality into his or her work. There was often a sense of gratitude and a feeling of privilege to be able to join another person on their healing journey. Several participants discussed feeling grounded (Participants 2 & 3) and Participant 4 identified feeling strengthened by the use of spirituality in the therapeutic process.

I feel a privilege and an honor when I connect with people on that level and they trust me enough to share these things with me. And that is super important to me and it feeds me and it feeds my work. So. And I think that helps me combat vicarious trauma huge (Participant 5)

You work through all of that and physical symptoms are gone. Interesting. How that happens. Ummm but it's beautiful to witness. When people actually go through that (Participant 4)

I find what happens for me is that judgment flies out the window for me, in those moments. And I touch who I want to be. That's how I want to be in the world. I want to be a person without judgment. I know everybody has a bit of judgment but reasonable, right? (Participant 5)

I feel blessed to be able to be, just to be able to kind of sit in that seat, or sort of dive in myself to where they are coming from or what, you know (Participant 1)

It colours, it helps to brighten the colours of my existence (Participant 2)

Some participants recognized a reciprocal aspect in this work, as they learned things about themselves which helped to inform and broaden their own spiritual beliefs. Participant 2 specifically discussed the mutual aspect of spirituality in the work.

Part of the process of therapy, where I get to know something about this client, this being in front of me, this spiritual being, and this spiritual being shares in front of me, I get to know parts of myself that I tap into in order to understand their process (Participant 2)

And my own awareness as well, my own bias when they come in and making sure that I'm being self aware and not translating that into the client's experience (Participant 3)

Ummm which then helps me elevate myself and elevates the client at the same time so it's a mutual sharing, a mutual journey, I think (Participant 2)

Therapy Itself As Spiritual

Many participants discussed the therapy process as spiritual and recognized it as service to others, whether this was tied to connection or to religious ideology. At times, participants had difficulty articulating how the therapeutic process is spiritual and instead drew on the experiential aspect and how it impacts them. Additionally, Participants 1 and 4 explicitly discussed how his and her own connection to spirituality cannot be separated from them, therefore they enter the therapy space with their whole self, accompanied by some aspect of spirituality.

It seems that there's something very sacred about therapy itself. I mean, we have like, you know the sanctity of confidentiality, the, all of the rituals around how we are together (Participant 1)

There are things that I cannot do as a therapist that can only be done through spirit (Participant 4)

Through this work, I think I have had many experiences where I have connected with people on a really spiritual level, is the only way I can think it. Like, it's very human to human versus than therapist to client, kind of (Participant 5)

I view the therapy process itself as a very spiritual thing. And this is not specific to sexual abuse survivors but I think that, the offering of something, one's being and offering that being to be in conjunction with another person's being is a very intimate and a very transcendent and very spiritual offering of vulnerability and openness and I find that in itself is an aspect of spirituality (Participant 2)

Participants also discussed receiving training in various theoretical orientations, which they identify as lending themselves to a spiritual perspective, such as Hakomi, Existential

Analysis, Aboriginal Focus-Oriented Therapy, and body-focused therapies. One therapist described his theoretical orientation as “existential with Buddhism” (Participant 2).

Hakomi in theory has a strong connection to spiritual teachings of various sorts (Participant 1)

I really appreciate this form of existentialism because it's not so individualistic, it's much more holistic, and much more encompassing of spirituality, of emotions, of feelings, of the physical being, of thoughts (Participant 4)

Two participants identified working with clients who experienced addiction issues and had accessed treatment prior to attending therapy. Certain treatment models introduced clients to a spiritual component so when they began therapy focusing on the sexual trauma, they already came in with an understanding and connection of spirituality.

So there's a certain number of our clients that have gone through addiction issues and those generally speaking, that I've worked with personally, have subscribed to the AA model, the 12 step model and that usually incorporates spirituality (Participant 2)

Not Knowing

A theme of not knowing became evident as therapists discussed not assuming people are open to discussions and/or work surrounding spirituality, taking instead a position of curiosity, or sitting with clients as they search to find answers and meaning. Some therapists discussed not being clear for themselves where they stand on specific spiritual ideas and continuing to explore various aspects.

If I believe in karma and I believe that people have karmic paths, then what does that really say that about sexual abuse? And that's a question that I'm still grappling with

myself, so it's something that I can't really, definitively give you an answer on
(Participant 2)

It is partly through the therapeutic process, that previous ideas are challenged once they have been placed within the context of sexual trauma. This illustrates the continued learning process in the area of spirituality. One participant shared a story in which she had assumed the incorporation of religion and spirituality was important for a client, as the client was attending Pastoral college. This was not discovered until the end of their professional relationship when the therapist checked in with the client and the client was able to provide feedback.

Instead of me just assuming, well, ok you're a Pastor, you're studying, you're still in school, clearly you obviously love Christianity. Well maybe, but it wasn't a comfort to her for a long time and I missed that (Participant 5)

This has had a lasting effect on the therapist as she continues to remember this incident and utilize it to inform her current practice. Although most therapists strive to be cautious of their own biases and assumptions, and certainly each therapist in this study endeavors to practice in such a way, there are times when slips occur.

Recognizing the complexity and the vastness of spiritual ideas allows the participants to remain open and reflexive, even though at times feelings of frustration and confusion may emerge.

And so even though the vast majority of clients I do have so much hope and resiliency and I do see a lot of grace in it and a lot of hope and movement, there are clients that I see sometimes and I'm like, 'geez Louise man', just a huge history of trauma, part of or all of being sexualized trauma but can also be other types of trauma and I, and I struggle with that by way of, how do you make sense of that, how

do you help this person make sense of “why them?” over and over and over and over again (Participant 5)

This stance of not knowing or not having answers can provide a lens or an approach to the work rather than dealing with a specific incident. This stance allows them to enter the journey with the client and join them in the exploration of the unknown.

I generally step into this space of curiosity and wonder (Participant 1)

I seem to come to with clients sometimes, or we come to together, which is around this idea of like, why? That why question. (Participant 1)

Discussion

Although not all participants in this study were social workers, the implications for the practice and field of social work are far reaching. Spirituality and social work have a long history together. In fact, many social welfare policies and social services were born out of Christian and Jewish concepts of charity in the first half of the 20th century (Canda, 2010). However, following this, social work entered a period of professionalization in which separation from the church was necessary in order for social work to be taken seriously among other professions and within the academic world (Canda, 2010). This separation continued for a significant amount of time and can still be felt in today’s social work practice. While social work continues to debate how and whether spirituality should be formally accepted into the field, other disciplines such as medicine, hospice care, psychiatry, pastoral counselling, and nursing are defining and incorporating spirituality into practice within their respective fields (Canda, 2010).

Due to a reluctance to incorporate spirituality into the social work sphere, many social workers have not been exposed to its practice within a professional context. Barker and Floersch (2010) address this, highlighting the excluded element of spirituality in social work education.

They contend that social workers are not receiving formal education or training pertaining to spirituality. On a macro level, consideration must be given to the fact that each participant discussed a need to educate themselves in relation to spirituality as this was not addressed in their formal education. Although some participants identified certain theoretical orientations lend themselves to a spiritual perspective, this had to be sought out following completion of graduate work. Others had a personal interest in spirituality which led them to explore this further and eventually began to inform their work.

Various authors propose practice methods for incorporating spirituality in the social work field. The goal is not to create a spiritually-driven practice, but to truly practice holistically, spirituality needs to be balanced within the work being done (Coholic, 2003). Rather than teaching students in social work the numerous concepts pertaining to spirituality, ideas have been suggested for education which include providing new language, supporting self-reflection in terms of one's own spiritual ideas, discussing assessment techniques (Barker & Floersch, 2010), clarifying definitions to make the topic more accessible, and practicing spiritual sensitivity (Canda, 2010), much like the practice of cultural sensitivity. Spiritual sensitivity contributes to practitioners' way of being and helps them to relate to many clients throughout the helping process (Canda, 2010). It is a lens through which to practice that ensures that spirituality is being addressed with clients. However, Participant 3 cautions that spirituality is and must be a person's choice; to incorporate it into the educational system requires careful consideration and respectful boundaries.

In addition, due to the lack of attention on spirituality, some agencies have not recognized or understood the benefits or the need for it to be incorporated or offered in healing work. Participant 4 discussed working at an organization and had to prove the benefit and obtain

permission prior to offering various activities to clients. If spirituality within the healing context was given more attention, she would not have been placed in a position to defend its use. Further, if spirituality in sexual trauma therapy is not given space to be discussed or explored, the value of it remains hidden and inaccessible. Participant 5 highlights this, stating, “if I don't feel spirituality is a big thing, then I'm probably not going to put it in my work”. Although there may be some environments in which therapists are given the opportunity to examine this phenomenon, it was not evident that participants in this study are given such space.

It's a fun exercise right now for me, just the act of trying to spell this out, is in itself fun because I don't, it's not something I normally do is actually sit down with somebody and say, how, you know, how do you conceptualize this (Participant 1).

The question remains, is this space necessary? Some may not see the need for this practice but it could be helpful in a group setting to assist therapists in articulating their work and to expand other practitioners' perspectives. Many therapists partake in group meetings for case consultations; this promotes accountability, transparency, and reflexivity. What is the barrier to discussing spirituality in these settings?

This directly impacts clients on a micro level. Therapists could be considered the gatekeepers of the therapeutic process as their point(s) of view of may have a significant impact on the course of action in the counselling session. As previously stated, clients identified spirituality as number two in terms of helpful service, yet in another study, Morrison et al. (2009) found only 31% of clients accessing secular practice have had spirituality included in therapy, and that they were often the ones to introduce it into the session. Clients may not know that spirituality is acceptable to address if counsellors are not explicitly approaching or exploring it. Simply because a therapist may consider spirituality an important element of healing and/or

coping does not suggest it needs to be actively incorporated in working with clients; however, it would be negligent and unethical to not explore client's spirituality (Morrison et al., 2009).

Limitations

All research projects experience various limitations and this is important to examine. The sample size in this study was relatively small with only 5 participants. In regards to the limited sample size, this study was not intended to make generalizable claims but rather utilize an evocative sampling strategy to convey a flavor of the phenomenon of interest (Mason, 2002). Data that are rich and experiential do not require a large sample size (Morse, 2000), and support from the literature, normalizes the use of up to ten participants in a phenomenological approach to research (Creswell, 2013; Morse, 2000). However, a larger sample size may provide a greater understanding of the various experiences of spirituality.

Location must also be taken into consideration. As one participant pointed out, "so spirituality's very much a component that a lot of clients naturally bring in with them because it's reflective of the community that we're in" (Participant 3). Four of the participants of this study live in Vancouver and work in environments which support addressing spirituality in the work. The experience of spirituality in the counselling process may be applicable to this region but not necessarily to other provinces or cities. It is also recognized that the majority of the work participants are engaged in, occurs within an office setting which may limit certain aspects of engaging in spiritual practices. Therefore, the location of the phenomenon being explored in this study may have an environmental aspect to it.

Lastly, data generation must be noted for several reasons. As already discussed, utilizing a constructivist stance heavily situates the researcher in the interview process, allowing for conversation and thus influencing the responses provided by participants. The presence of the

researcher will always play a role in the information provided and even more so when the researcher utilizes a semi-structured interview format. There is also a lack of standardized tests, control group, and additional data collection methods in the research design, thereby decreasing the use of triangulation and potentially impacting validity. The incorporation of a focus group in this study may have increased validity, as well as provided a space of shared knowledge to build upon.

Future Research

As spirituality continues to re-emerge in the helping professions, many directions for future research exist. All therapists discussed an impact both professionally and personally of utilizing and recognizing spirituality in their work. The impact was often positive in nature leading to the question of how spirituality may potentially impact vicarious trauma and burnout of practitioners in the sexual trauma field. This project explored therapists' experience with spirituality; however, as social work is a broad and diverse field, further research could explore how spirituality is experienced in other social work settings.

Although qualitative and quantitative methods have been utilized to explore spirituality in mental health practice, the use of phenomenology has received little attention. While the phenomenon of spirituality is available to everyone, the experience of spirituality may vary widely due to the personal nature and fluidity of definition. This makes it an ideal candidate for a phenomenological study as it includes both objective and subjective elements. This could be utilized in two different ways. First, exploring the sexual trauma therapists' experience of spirituality in the counselling process from a phenomenological approach could provide a deeper understanding of the essence of the experience versus the low-inference method used in this study. Secondly, a phenomenological study exploring client's experience with spirituality in the

therapeutic process addressing sexual trauma would provide valuable insight into the needs of clients and a better understanding of their lived experience.

Conclusion

In a previous research study exploring spirituality within feminist social work practice, a participant stated, “lots of people are doing it [working with spirituality]; they just haven’t named it” (Coholic, 2003, pp. 59-60). In this research project I sought to provide therapists with a space to speak about their work and to articulate their experiences to potentially inform future practice. The perpetration of sexual violence continues to exist and impact not only individuals but entire communities. The work associated with healing is important and spirituality can be an important aspect in that; “there's something about the nature of trauma that, that kind of, resonates, or echoes, or ripples into the world of spirit” (Participant 1).

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