

Understanding the Spiritual Lives of Adolescents

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Abstract

Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human. Spiritual values and beliefs are fundamental elements of cultural diversity and the ecological model of social work practice. Spiritual questions about purpose and identity take on important meaning in the turbulent lives of teenagers. In order to help teens address the spiritual dimension of their lives, social workers must understand their beliefs in the context of human development and culture. Demonstrating sensitivity to the spiritual traditions and expressions used by clients, social workers can help youth explore sources of spiritual strength and concern, investigate their definitions of meaning and purpose, and instill hope. This paper explores the connection between spirituality and identity development, and address the need for spiritually sensitive social work practice with adolescents.

Adolescent development is a complex combination of biological, emotional, cognitive, social and cultural domains. It is a time of tremendous change that occurs at a rate that is unmatched since infancy. Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human. Spiritual questions, such as “Why am I here?” and “What is the meaning of life?” take on important meaning in the turbulent lives of teenagers. A workgroup of the Society for Research on Adolescence found that scholarly work on spiritual and religious values in adolescents is limited and largely unexplored within developmental sciences (Larson, Brown & Mortimer, 2002). Social work students report relatively little exposure to content on religion and spirituality in their educational program (Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999). This paper will explore the connection between spirituality and identity development, and address the need for spiritually sensitive social work practice with adolescents.

Social workers generally tout their ability to work with clients from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Human diversity includes spiritual values and traditions. Spiritual beliefs are fundamental elements of cultural diversity and the ecological model of social work practice. While most social workers understand the need to address issues of faith, they are often fearful of incorporating spiritual perspectives into social work practice. Benner (1989) described spirituality as “a deep and mysterious human yearning for self-transcendence and surrender, a yearning to find meaning and a place in the world” (as cited in Bruce & Cockreham, 2004, p.335). It includes one’s values, beliefs, experiences and sense of purpose.

Spiritual beliefs are often tied to values, which often guide an adolescent's decision making and behavior. In order to help teens address the spiritual dimension of their lives, social workers must understand their beliefs in the context of human development and culture. Through education and good supervision, social workers can explore their own spiritual values and recognize their personal biases or unresolved spiritual issues. Demonstrating sensitivity to the spiritual traditions and expressions used by clients, social workers can help youth explore sources of spiritual strength and concern, investigate their definitions of meaning and purpose, and instill hope. Ethical concerns are common when attending to spiritual issues in adolescent counseling. Practice must include spiritual sensitivity in ways that are consistent with the NASW code of ethics. Social workers are required to work within a client's belief system and allow them to share their worldview without imposing their own personal values and faith.

Adolescents regularly have a hard time communicating their spiritual values and beliefs. This is partially due to the fact that they are rarely asked about them. Spirituality includes one's values, beliefs, mission, awareness, experience, sense of purpose and direction, a striving toward something greater than oneself. It may or may not include a deity. Jerome Dollard writes:

Spirituality is a lot like health. We all have health, we may have good health or poor health, but it's something we can't avoid having. The same is true of spirituality: Every human being is a spiritual being. The question is not whether we have spirituality but whether the spirituality we have is a negative one that leads to isolation and self destruction or one that is more positive and life-giving (as quoted in Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p.17).

In 2002 and 2003, researchers at the University of North Carolina completed a national survey of youth and religion using a sample of 3290 teenagers between 13-17 years old. Smith and Lundquist Denton (2005) observed that "teenagers are themselves engaged in a kind of search for their own souls, trying to sort through their life and faith identity, beliefs, commitments, and practices in their long passages from childhood to adulthood" (p. 259). Faith plays an important role in the lives of teenagers and "faith exerts a significant influence on their moral views and choices" (p.260). The study found that 84% of teens believe in God and 80% report the importance of faith in shaping major life decisions as

somewhat to very important. Sixty percent of the teens surveyed reported praying at least once a week and 38% report praying at least one a day.

Many social workers still believe that the spiritual issues in adolescence are limited to their involvement in cults, satanic worship, black magic, or other perceived harmful beliefs. In reality, very few adolescents (1/3 of 1%, .0033) are involved in those types of spiritual belief systems or practices (Smith & Lundquist Denton, 2005). The majority of US teens tend to be very much like their parents when it comes to their spiritual beliefs. They tend to share similar values, religious traditions and frequently

attend services with their parents. Many teens have been or are currently involved in a variety of organized religious activities. “The fact that they may not have particularly well-articulated beliefs about their own religious traditions does not alter the fact that the vast majority of U.S. teenagers embrace some religious identity...” (Smith & Lundquist Denton, 2005, p. 260).

One of the main tasks of adolescents is shaping their identity or answering the question “who am I?” As adolescents individuate, they struggle to delineate the many facets of their identities including vocational identity, sexual identity, cultural identity and spiritual identity. Irwin (2002) defines identity as:

the process by which we become less dependent on other for maintaining our self esteem. As young children we are entirely at the mercy of our parents and of others to reward and punish us, but we soon take over this process for ourselves and internalize it so that we become our own instruments of reward and punishment. At first, morality and control operate via external reinforcements. Later, we rely on guilt, activated internally. In adulthood, we rely on ideological self-esteem and self-definition to serve as barometers of control. More and more of the social world becomes internalized to the point the whole court and jury, both the police and the priesthood, resides in the mind (Irwin, 2004, p.97).

The emergence of spiritual issues in adolescence is, in part, due to their ability to think abstractly (Piaget, 1972). They are increasingly capable of contemplating social, moral, political issues in depth (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004). In Erickson’s (1968) fifth developmental stage, identity vs. identity

confusion, adolescents are aware that they are becoming a contributor to society and their search for who they are drives their actions and thoughts. They attempt to differentiate their beliefs and values from those of their parents or caregivers. Identity achievement is a crucial developmental milestone as it enables the teen to make positive contributions to their community and prevent identity diffusion. Ideological frameworks provide adolescents with clear values, beliefs, and worldviews that serve as a cornerstone of a teen's identity (Muuss, 1988). Faith traditions can offer adolescents a worldview composed of specific values and beliefs. These traditions, in turn, can sustain a teen with a sense of identity, purpose and

belonging during their transition to adulthood. However, as teens think more abstractly, they may perceive and understand their past and current experiences differently. New ideas may clash with previously valued authorities, or if God is viewed as an authority figure, they may reject a relationship with a higher power completely. Disequilibrium, conflict and confusion can be the result of an adolescent's need to resolve this internal crisis, assimilate new information and restore balance (Bruce & Cockreham, 2004).

The popular and extensive research of James Fowler focuses on how faith changes and develops over the lifespan. Fowler (1981) writes that faith "is a universal human concern...we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will makes life worth living. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being" (p. 5). In Fowler's "synthetic-conventional" stage of faith development, youth begin to develop a capacity for operational thinking. Faith provides a unifying means of synthesizing values and information and can serve as a basis of forming a stable identity. During this stage, faith is constructed through conformity to a set of values and beliefs with deference to authority. Their values and beliefs are typically unexamined. This stage is characterized by a hunger for a close, personal relationship with God. A clue that teens are beginning to move beyond this stage is when they

begin to question authority and previously established beliefs and values. Spirituality may be perceived as an extension of the adolescent's interpersonal relationships. It is through these interpersonal relationships that they see themselves and come to know who they are. Many adolescents experience God as a close friend and ally. They want a God who knows them intimately, someone who strengthens their esteem and sense of purpose. A close personal relationship with a higher power can provide a sense of safety, love and security in a turbulent world where they are besieged with peer pressure and feelings of inadequacy.

Older teens and young adults begin to critically examine their beliefs and gradually begin to take responsibility for a worldview that they themselves have chosen. In Fowler's (1981) "individuation-reflective" stage of development, the adolescent is able to critically reflect on the stories, symbols, rituals and myths of one's traditions and translate them into conceptual meaning. They commit themselves to faith through conscious choice rather than through unexamined acceptance. Faith development is correlated to identity-forming questions such as "why was I born?", "how can I find meaning in life?", "where does life lead?" and "how can I find my purpose?"

William Bridges (1980) identified three main stages of any transition or transformation: the ending, the neutral zone and the new beginning. This can be a useful model in understanding the necessary developmental life crisis of adolescence. There is a necessity of letting go and saying goodbye to parts of themselves such as childhood beliefs in order for growth to occur. As teens labor to create a revised identity, they look back at their childhood and try to conceptualize a life story (Fowler, 1981). Their life stories frequently include religious or spiritual narratives. These narratives are commonly shaped by a teen's interactions with parents, friends and peers.

The neutral zone, the ambiguous area between the old and the new, is where many adolescents find themselves struggling to let go of the past and realign themselves with a new identity, and often a new worldview (Bridges, 1980). It is important to recognize the neutral zone as a normal part of the developmental crisis of adolescence. It is often disorienting, painful, confusing and frustrating, but

necessary for personal growth. Adolescents may be conscious of their struggle to find significance and purpose in life, yet most teens aren't aware that, in the chrysalis of the neutral zone, they could be experiencing a spiritual awakening. Their emerging cognitive abilities allow them to ask questions about abstract issues and they are increasingly aware that there are more "gray" areas of life than they observed in their "black and white" childhood. Prevailing values and beliefs emerge in their moral reasoning as they initiate a search for meaning that will continue throughout their lives (adapted from Bridges, 1980).

Adolescent behavior in the "neutral zone" may be the exact opposite of what one may consider spiritual. These behaviors include rebelliousness, anger, stubbornness, assertiveness, loneliness, moodiness, sadness, and cynicism. It is important to closely assess the spiritual lives of adolescents to better understand their worldview and the context in which they live. When the worldview of a teen's parents or faith tradition no longer "fits" comfortably, they are forced to critically analyze and synthesize alternate views and develop their own belief system. Social workers can support teens in this quest by praising their investigation of spiritual matters. Introspection and values clarification require cognitive abilities that are often just forming in early adolescence. Dr. Jay Giedd's research at the National Institute of Mental Health discovered that "contrary to previous thinking, the brain's prefrontal cortex goes through a growth spurt at the onset of adolescence until about the age of twenty. This area of the brain handles emotional control, decision making, and impulse restraint" (as cited in Doe, 2004, p.249). Due to this, adolescents are spontaneous, moody and may quickly fluctuate from feelings of spiritual euphoria to spiritual emptiness. Social workers should accept that a teen's moral compass may be built on emotions and not well thought out.

Integrity is the cornerstone in which a strong therapeutic relationship with a teenager is built. Adolescents need healthy friends, mentors, and role models that support their journey through the "neutral zone". Because of their developmental need to question authority and individuate, adolescents may become disappointed and disillusioned by the character flaws of their parents, the corrupt activities of

authority figures and the abuses of people within formal religious traditions. They regularly identify inconsistencies between the words and actions of adults. Teens look at the pain and suffering in the world and question the existence of a loving, compassionate God. Because of these reservations, youth look for social workers that are honest, “real” and genuine, someone who “walks the talk” and will take them seriously. Adolescents coming from socially toxic home environments have learned that adults can’t or won’t protect them. They learn to distrust people and keep quiet about their fears and vulnerabilities. Patricia Hersch (1995) says that adolescents “need adults who bear witness to the details of their lives and

count them as something...they need appreciation for who they are" (p. 363). They search for confidants who will actively listen to and understand their doubts, fears and confusion.

Many counselors have found the use of expressive arts helpful in supporting an adolescent’s search to understand their internal process (Allen, 2005).

Aside from the therapeutic benefit of nonverbal thoughts and feeling, one of the impressive aspects of the art process is its potential to achieve and restore psychological equilibrium. The use of the art process as intervention is not mysterious or particularly novel; it may have been one of the reasons that humankind developed art in the first place-to alleviate or contain feelings of trauma, fear, anxiety and psychological threats to the self and community (Malchiodi, 1990, p.5).

Many teens sincerely may not be able to articulate how they feel or to describe their intrapersonal conflict or spiritual quest. The use of expressive activities such as music, poetry, drawing and painting may assist in attaching external symbols to new, bewildering and perplexing internal experiences. The mythologist, Joseph Campbell (1974), writes that “pictures invite the eye not to rush a long, but to rest awhile and dwell with them in the enjoyment of the revelation" (p. 10). Looking at an external representation of these experiences may increase the adolescent’s capacity look critically and more objectively at their emerging beliefs and worldview.

Social work is an inclusive profession. Spiritual development needs to be recognized as an important domain of human development. Numerous studies have shown that religiosity and spirituality

function as a protective factor in adolescence (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Bridges & Moore, 2002; Kerestes & Youniss, 2003). Researchers are beginning to explore religion and spirituality as a developmental asset that may decrease harmful behavior in adolescence and enhance the transition to adulthood. Culturally competent and spiritually sensitive social workers are obligated to pay closer attention to the spiritual values and beliefs of teens. For sure, no one can give someone else a sense of mission, purpose or meaning. If social workers model the importance of seeking those things and take the issues as seriously as teens do, honoring and respecting their quest, they may be able to provide them with the help they need to survive and thrive during this difficult stage of development.

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