

What if your Spirituality Train is Just Leaving the Station?

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Abstract

Social work educators and field instructors introducing spirituality into their teaching may wonder how to start the journey for themselves and their students? An assessment of spiritual comfort levels of the instructor, the students and the field setting is helpful. Determining why the instructor is bringing spirituality “out of the closet” and into the classroom at this point in time is also an important step in expanding comfort levels of all concerned. This paper explores the questions “why where, and how” to begin the spiritual journey in generalist and anti-oppressive social work practice. “Re-imagining” social work by placing spirituality specifically in values and ethics social work education injects spirituality into the whole social work curriculum and into life-long personal and professional education.

Introduction

Much of the literature on social work and spirituality presumes a comfort level that some social work educators and students may not have. Few Canadian schools of social work offer courses on spirituality in social work. Nor, does the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) accreditation criteria require that spirituality be placed in the curriculum. In the USA, approximately 100 schools of social work offer courses in religion and spirituality (Hodge, 2003, citing Canda & Furman, 1999) and a flourishing research culture around spirituality, religiosity and social work has developed. There has been a growth in spirituality and social work conferences where many of the participants seem to be well along their “spiritual journey” both personally and professionally.

The instructor new to the integration of spirituality in social work and in field settings may be somewhat intimidated by the comfort levels of other colleagues at these conferences and may well wonder about their own competencies around spirituality and religiosity both personally and professionally. Some may still believe in a ‘faith-spirituality-religiosity blind’ social work educational approach. Others may struggle with self-doubt about where to place spirituality in the curriculum. Some may struggle with a fear of violating student’s rights. Still others may wonder how to proceed if students “self-declare” as non-spiritual or if a student is so self-revealing that other students are over-whelmed.

More information on the “how-to’s and some of the pit-falls that might occur when spirituality is introduced into the social work curriculum is needed. Furthermore, more information is needed particularly about the introduction of spirituality and religiosity into Canadian social work education given our highly culturally diverse and therefore spirituality diverse society. This paper is for educators, field instructors, and students at the beginning of the voyage of discovery of their own location of spirituality in social work. It is based upon the author’s own experience, starting from a low comfort level, of introducing spirituality in both large and small classes at all levels of the undergraduate social work curriculum.

Spirituality: Why are We Hesitating

The re-introduction of spirituality/religiosity into the social work educational system suggests a potential quagmire of offended students, human rights issues, or a balancing act of fairness and equal time to all religious groups that would be the envy of any professional world-class juggler. For many social work educators in none faith-based schools, “political correctness” has resulted in the deliberate eradication of all signs of religion and spirituality from the classroom. “Merry Christmas” has carefully been replaced with “Happy Holidays”; the “Christmas end of term party” is now a “winter celebration”; statutes and holy symbols have been removed from their former niches; and, any reference to any Holy book from any world religion, or any spiritual leader have been carefully edited out of lectures.

Part of the anxiety of introducing spirituality relates to the meticulous shedding of religious connections in social work. No where was this more evident than MSW education in Ontario in the early 1970's. My MSW class and I transitioned (somewhat magically) in second year from attending Waterloo Lutheran to attending Wilfrid Laurier. The change was made so that provincial monies could be obtained. The name change seemed to be accompanied by a removal of whatever small particles of religion and spirituality still existed in the MSW curriculum. The “new” message seemed to be that religiosity—the term spirituality was not heard—was primarily an area outside of social work education. This was particularly re-enforced for those whose subsequent social work practice took place in mental health settings.

Social work in Canada has witnessed a paradigm shift, which can be dated by the success of the first Canadian conference on Spirituality and Social Work (2001). The social work literature generally has found that students are interested in, but don't receive information in the use of spirituality in practice (Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999). So why should spirituality and religiosity return to social work education? The answer in part may be the whole-sale adoption of the generalist approach. For Ben Asher (2001) the generalist approach demands the inclusion of spirituality and religiosity. He suggests that if we do not feel competent in these areas that this “is a state of affairs that should not be rationalized but instead should be remedied with all possible speed” (p.5). Gotterer (2001) in a similar vein argues that social work has to consider the spiritual dimension for it to be “whole”. Derezotes' (1995) formulation of Advanced Generalist social work includes biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors. Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs includes “self-transcendence” which has been overlooked and is an important part of moving away from pathology to a strengths perspective (Damianakis, 2001). Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, Kumper, 1990 in their work on protective factors of resiliency include spirituality as a key component of resiliency.

Payne (2005) addresses the question of spirituality place in social work education in his argument that religion and spirituality are integral parts of living, that inclusion of spirituality is a response to the needs of ethnic and cultural minorities, that we need to recognize the political interests affected by spirituality and religion which are ways to increase social stability and ameliorate social difficulties, and there is an increasing need to find meaning of life in the materialistic, consumerist Western world (p. 190). Spirituality has connections to social change (Payne, 2005; Tisdell, 2000; Freire, 1997; Daloz, Keene, Keene, Parks, 1996).

There is of course a strong historical argument as the re-inclusion of spirituality is a return to the very roots of social work in the connections to the settlement house movement, the charity organization movement, the Social Gospel movement, and the Antigonish movement (Hick, 2006; Turner and Turner, 2005).

Social work has always recognized that spirituality is central to many addictions settings and an integral part of palliative care. There is a particularly well developed literature on spirituality and helping (Coholic, 2005; Coates, 2003; Bullis, 1996). Adult education, counselling, nursing, medicine and business have all embraced self-reflection and spirituality as necessary components of student learning and have linked spirituality to overall health and well-being (Atkinson, 2001; McGee, Nagel, & Moore, 2003; Scandurra, 1999).

Spiritual Diversity and Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice:

Hodge (2003) offers some valuable advice for those who are about to include spirituality in their courses in his reminder that there is a wide diversity of spiritual frameworks and world views. He cautions that social workers who are unreflective of the broader culture are in danger of oppressing under-represented groups and that a faith-blind approach is oppressive to people of faith (p. 349).

The Helper Questions:

For those looking at including spirituality in their teaching a consideration of some of the following questions might provide some guidance. (1) How, when and where should spirituality be placed in the curriculum and field instruction? What should be taught? Who should be developing/evaluating this content? (2) Where am I in my spirituality teaching and where are my students and field instructors? (3) Is it necessary to distinguish between spirituality and religiosity?

Spirituality: Where?

Spirituality for this author seems to fit well with the teaching of values, ethics, ethical dilemmas and professional codes of ethics. Young “describes spirituality as the underpinning of our values in higher education” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 2 citing Young, 1997) Much has been written about teaching values in social work education and the need to keep infusing values education throughout the social work curriculum (Hayes, 1999).

The following technique helps students “place” spirituality/religiosity” in values education. The Values Shield has four quadrants: personal values, societal values; professional values and agency values. At the centre of the shield, one can place Spirituality/religiosity as the core from which all our values are drawn. Students are asked to identify their guiding personal values and place these in Quadrant # 1 on their shield. They then identify their neighbourhood/community/societal values and place these in Quadrant # 2 on the shield; professional values are drawn from the Code of Ethics and placed in Quadrant # 3; and agency values are drawn from the mission and mandate of the field placement agency and placed in Quadrant # 4. If students are not in field placement from the values in Quadrant # 4 can be drawn from the student code of ethics or agencies where they have volunteered. Spirituality/religiosity is placed in the centre as the core from which all values are drawn. The Values Shield helps students recognize value conflicts can occur between quadrants that often the cause of ethical dilemmas (See Figure 1). The shield asks students to identify their own core values and think about how these values have been formed which is part of “the search for meaning and purpose in one’s life”—an operational definition of spirituality (Damianakis, 2001, p. 23).

Values education is the responsibility of all social work educators, therefore all social educators share responsibility in the development and inculcation of values knowledge. However as the instructor introducing the topic of spirituality and religiosity, the author has found it helpful to deliberately take the

position of presenting the topic as one of continued, life-long self-discovery and reappraisal. The class is introduced to the topic with the caveat that the instructor is not “an expert” nor seeking to take the role as “expert” but instead is asking students to reflect on where they see spirituality and religiosity in social work education.

Figure 1: Values Shield

Spirituality: How?

An assessment of comfort level with spirituality/religiosity will help both the instructor, students and field instructors identify where they are in the voyage of spirituality/religiosity. Tisdell (2000) suggests that there are three stages in this development: Stage 1--early adulthood where people move away from their childhood religion to facilitate identity development; Stage 2--where there is a need for inner reflection, and finding one’s center; and Stage 3--where a person re-members, re-frames or re-configures childhood faith core value identification as “spiral back” according to Tisdell (2000).

Keeping these stages in mind, it is also suggested that there are likely to be a continuum of comfort levels for the instructor; the student; and the field setting. It is suggested that the instructor consider the following continuum and have the students and field instructors place themselves on a continuum for their own self-awareness. Key questions to help in location along the continuum might include: (1) What role has religion/spirituality played in your life and has this changed over time? (2) How comfortable/uncomfortable are you in discussing your spirituality/religiosity with peers and colleagues? (3) Should self-awareness about comfort with spirituality/religiosity be a part of professional development in social work and/or the helping/health professions? Where would you place you self on the following continuum and why? Would you like to change your placement on the continuum--why or why not?

Class Instructor Continuum

- (1) At the Station: Beginning awareness: no experience with teaching spirituality or religiosity in the class room but ready to acknowledge these topics and have begun to consider “unpacking” some of their own baggage. Low comfort
- (2) Just Leaving the Station: Have introduced spirituality or religiosity as part of a class discussion but have not advanced from presenting definitions and a free-floating discussion. Low Comfort
- (3) Visiting at other Stations: Have tried different forms of presenting spirituality for example comparative religion, spiritual genograms and spiritual ecopmaps, still trying to develop a sense of direction, using this as part of a lecture or assignment. Medium comfort
- (4) Determining the Destination: Have a clear sense of direction with topic of spirituality/religiosity; can provide examples of use in clinical practice; can integrate this topic throughout a course. High comfort
- (5) Tour-Leader for other Travellers: Have developed materials to foster student engagement with spiritual reflection; have helped students and field instructors integrate spirituality into social work practice. High comfort

Student Continuum

The student continuum can be used individually or by placing students in small groups and (i) asking them to discuss how they would place themselves on the continuum and (ii) what in their past or present experience helped determine their choice.

(1) Turned Off: Tuned Out. Have no desire to explore with topic as a part of social work. Low Comfort

(2) Lecture for the Day: Learn it for the Exam. Not really interested in topic but not openly adverse; can't see relevance of topic to self or others; Low Comfort

(3) Not for Me; Fine for Others. Not interested in personal application but can see that others might benefit; have a desire to be congruent with social work values. Low Comfort

(4) Head but not Heart. Interested in topic from a cognitive perspective ie interested in learning about comparative religions but not interested in self-assessment. Medium Comfort

(5) Personal/Self-Awareness. Interested in exploration for self-awareness but not sure if this could be used in their professional careers. Good candidate for a spiritual genogram or spiritual ecomap. Medium Comfort

(6) Share and Care. This group has good spiritual awareness and can see applications. They may have had a peak experience, a grief experience, and/or a good relationship with religiosity. High Comfort

(7) Turned On but Turning other People Off. This group is very comfortable with their own spirituality/religiosity but also feel the need to "convert" people to their point of view. High Comfort.

The Field Placement Continuum

The final continuum can be done by the field instructor, or by the field student and field instructor.

(1) Not Interested. The field setting and instructor are not interested and not willing to consider inclusion of spirituality/religiosity in field instruction. Low Comfort

(2) Interested but No Experience. The field setting and instructor are interested but not sure how to help the student or introduce spirituality/religiosity in field

(3) Interested and Relevant. The setting and the instructor are interested and can identify situations where knowledge about spirituality and/or religiosity would be relevant. This would however not be seen as a large component of social work skill development. Medium Comfort

(4) Interested and Applied. The setting and the instructor are interested and the instructor can demonstrate application and could provide experiences for the student to integrate spirituality/religiosity content. High Comfort

(5) Interested and Integrated. The setting and instructor are committed to the incorporation of spirituality/religiosity as a part of social work knowledge, skills and values and practice experience in the setting. High Comfort

These then offer the social work educator a range of combinations of comfort that should be considered. It also suggests that discrepancies of comfort level might impede social work knowledge and skill development. It might also account for differential learning expectations and a sense of frustration on the part of either the student or the class/field education instructor

Table 1: Combination of Comfort Levels

Class Instructor	Student	Field Instructor/Setting
Low	Low	Low
Medium	Medium	Medium
High	High	High

What do we Mean by Spirituality?

What do we mean by spirituality? This is a very basic but very good starting point for students beginning their understanding of values and how values are formed in relation to personal and societal belief systems. Does this discussion need to separate the concept of spirituality from that of religion? For classroom purposes, the author has found it helpful to take the definition of religion as that of an organized and organizational belief system (Damianakis, 2001). The definition of spirituality is taken from Howden (1992, cited in McGee et al, 2003, p. 591) as follows: “Spirituality is defined as the dimension of one’s being that is an integrating or unifying factor and that is manifested through unifying interconnectedness, purpose and meaning in life, innerness or inner resources and transcendence”. Howden also has developed a Spirituality Assessment Scale (1992, cited in McGee et al, 2003) related to this definition that instructors may wish to consider. This question of the difference between spirituality and religiosity and whether one can exist separate one from the other is another good “starter” question.

Fostering Self-Reflection

We assume that students know how to self-reflect. Sometimes we forget to provide students with tools to develop self-reflection. The techniques presented here help students develop reflection skills through “structured self-reflection”. Hodge suggests a spiritual genogram (2001) or spiritual eco-map (2000) as a way of gaining understanding of religiosity and spirituality which often plays a critical role in family systems. Spiritual genograms (Bullis, 1996) aid in our understanding of how values and beliefs are passed on through the generations and are particularly useful for social workers working with clients of diverse cultural backgrounds (Hodge, 2001). Hodge (2001) provides detailed instructions for genogram construction and two sets of questions (a) questions to assist in the construction of a spiritual genogram; and (b) questions to be used for the transition to intervention.

The following questions by ben Asher (2001) are helpful for both personally and professional

development and in relation to how clients might be helped to reach their full potential. This author has found that small groups seem to offer students a comfortable climate to begin this type of self-reflection, noting that students should share at their own comfort level.

Do we have spiritual experiences? What do they feel like? What are their causes? How do they affect our day-to-day attitudes and actions? Do we most often feel spiritually empty or full? What does that feel like? How do we account for that condition? Do we have a religion? Do we belong to it or does it belong to us? Is it a source of emptiness and enervation or meaning and fulfillment for us? Does it alienate us from people or give us a role in a community we value? How does it affect our day-to-day attitudes and actions towards other people.

(ben Asher, 2001, p. 3).

Fostering the discovery of meaning or purpose in life starts a life-long voyage. The instructor should be prepared to share examples of what has meaning for his/her own discovery. Both the instructor and students can identify something that captured meaning for them in the form of (a) a song; (b) a piece of instrumental music; (c) a poem (d) a saying that has meaning; (e) a piece of art work or sculpture; (f) a sacred space or “calming place” and (g) a personal treasure. The answers to these questions can be put in a journal and/or shared in a class small group exercise.

The following tools are ways to foster internal spiritual self-reflection, Centering Exercises ask the student or client to explore personal thoughts and feelings through centering activities such as rhythmic exercise (walking, running, swimming), meditation, rhythmic breathing and visualization (McGee et al, 2003, p. 585). Ink-shedding exercises ask students to actively challenge “old ways of thinking, toxic thoughts and perceptions and feelings” through journal writing structured around the questions (a) why do I think this way and (b) what negative thoughts am I having about this experience (McGee, 2003, p. 585, citing Seaward, 1994, p. 127). Grounding exercises ask students to learn to “ground themselves” through meditation, paying attention to nature, participating in rituals, reading, discussing ideas and values, paying attention to life so that they can “manage stressful encounters with some degree of integrity and satisfaction. The fourth process—connecting is concerned with focussing on “others, nature, and with some power greater than oneself” (Seaward, 1994, 1997, cited in McGee, p. 585). This can also be expanded into an external self-reflection individual or small group spirituality exercise by discussing the following questions: (a) where do you “see or experience” spirituality in global events? (b) how would you react if a client asked you to pray with them or invited you to a religious ceremony? (c) would you or have you shared a “peak experience” with a friend, a social work instructor, a social work supervisor, a client. Some or all of these techniques offer students opportunities to do the some of the work that they expect of their clients. It may also be the first inoculation of a life-long series to protect against burnout. Social work educators need to share their techniques and tools for fostering spiritual diversity and development and the innovations that they and their students create or as Canda says “dare to innovate’ (2003).

Conclusion

By its very definitions, social work is a spiritual activity. The author suggests that both for professional competence in holistic assessments and as a part of life-long learning to promote professional resiliency and avoid burnout, we owe our students the knowledge and skills required to facilitate their ability to assess their own spirituality and spiritual needs and to recognize these in clients. This raises several questions: (a) should the inclusion of spirituality/religiosity content be required as part of the social

work curriculum and should this be reflected in Accreditation requirements? and (b) in the same way, elders are recognized by First Nation's peoples, can social work develop some social work equivalent to "elders" who could advise on spirituality content, develop curriculum content and set the standards for an acceptable level of content. These are questions that social work educators, field instructors and students should reflect upon as part of professional development and competencies.

As social work educators, we should consider ourselves negligent if we do not provide an opportunity for students to consider the role of spirituality and religiosity in their own personal and professional development. The journey is life-long, the baggage will need to be packed, unpacked and re-packed, but we need to offer students a ticket, a map, and facilitate the development of resiliency to seek their destinations, face de-railments and to continue the voyage.

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