Spirituality and Clinical Research

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Spirituality and Social Work Practice

- Broadly speaking, the field is emergent.
- We need more studies that investigate intervention methods and their influence on client change.
- Much of the literature that discusses the effectiveness of spiritually-sensitive helping is based on personal experiences, case studies, & survey research.

An Emergent Field

➢ To acknowledge the current limits is not a criticism of the field or the type of knowledge that it represents.

➢ Kabat-Zinn (2003): *When a field is in its infancy, it is not uncommon for the first generation of studies to be more descriptive of the phenomenon rather than definitive demonstrations of efficacy. Attempts at the latter tend to evolve over time after the potential value of a new approach has been at least tentatively established.*

The Next Step

➢ One of the next important steps in the overall development of this body of knowledge is to investigate the helpfulness of spiritually-influenced practice.

➢ We need to address concerns about the "fuzziness" of this practice & better understand how it actually takes place, and shapes the helping process.

Qualitative Methods

➢ 1. inductive approaches that aim to generate theory. Our research is exploratory with the goal of discovering new knowledge. At this stage we need to better understand how the practice actually occurs in the real world with real people and all the complexities they bring to the helping process.

Grounded Theory Approaches

➢ 2. practice professions have made considerable use of grounded theory in their quest to conduct research that is relevant for practice. We need solid links between practice & research.

➢ 3. qualitative methods tend to be more compatible with Aboriginal, feminist, and social work values & beliefs.

Grounded Theory Approaches

➢ 4. grounded theory approaches allow investigation of practice with ability to respond to unexpected events that often occur when conducting social work with people.

Practice Research

➢ Many have argued that a shift is occurring within the academic & scientific communities in that a spiritual dimension is increasingly being considered.

➢ Similarly, the issue of what type of practice research is possible to carry out, and what type will produce findings of use for practitioners is coming under increasing question.
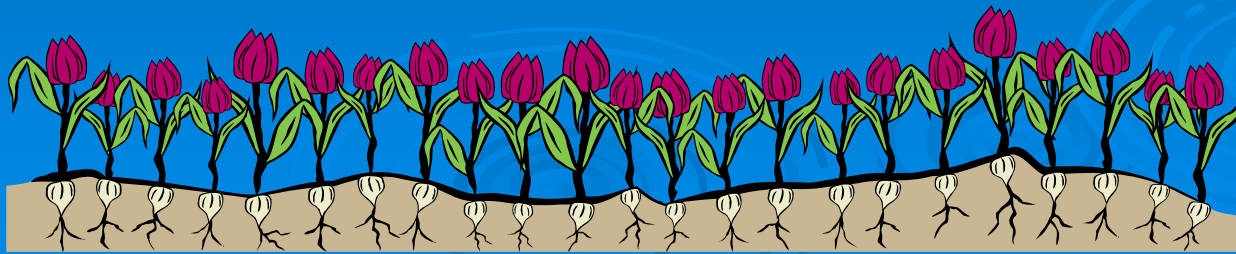
Practice Effectiveness Research

➢ Efficacy study contrasts some kind of therapy to comparison group under well-controlled conditions

- Clients are randomly assigned
- Controls are rigorous – placebos are used to control for influences such as rapport, expectation of gain
- Treatments are highly scripted
- Target outcomes are well operationalized
- Diagnosticians are blind to which group the client comes from
- Clients meet criteria for single diagnosed disorder – multiple problems are typically excluded
- Clients are followed for fixed period after termination of treatment with thorough assessment battery.

**Martin Seligman (1995)
"The Effectiveness of
Psychotherapy, the Consumer
Reports Study" in**
American Psychologist

➤ Deciding whether one treatment, under highly controlled conditions, works better than another treatment or a control group, is a different question from deciding what works in the field.
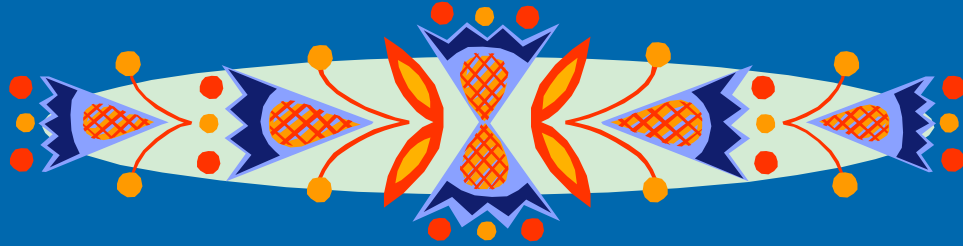
> The efficacy study is the wrong method for empirically validating psychotherapy as it is actually done, because it omits too many crucial elements of what is done in the field:

- Use different modalities and change treatment as we go along
- People have multiple problems
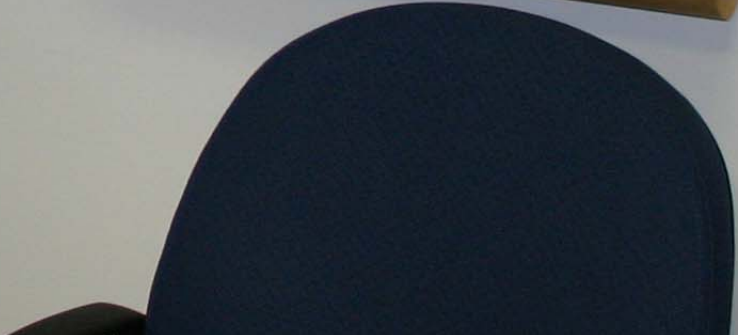- Concerned with overall improvement in general functioning.

Our Group Program

➢ The pilot study was organized around the following themes:

- An introduction to the importance of process & the nature of the group work
- Stream of consciousness writing
- The shadow self
- Mindfulness meditation
- Dream analysis
- Ending & evaluating the group experience.

Our study explored:

How spirituality is discussed in group practice & experienced by the participants.

Examined the participants' perceptions about the group processes & its helpfulness (or not)

Collected self-reports of self-esteem before & after participation in the group as another measure of the group's influence or perceived helpfulness.

Research Findings:

➢ 1st, the participants experienced different aspects of the group as spiritually-sensitive

➢ 2nd, the exercises identified as spiritually-influenced don't have to be classified as spiritual experiences (for example, dream analysis).

➢ However, these processes make sense to some people as spiritual experiences & the discussion of them may naturally lead to considering the spiritual dimension in people's lives.

What was spiritual & helpful?

➢ 1. Working with dreams.

- Dreams guided her to action: *I went into rehab after having the dream.*

- Recurring dream was past-life experience – used it to make meaning of current situation.

- Reading about dreams elicited spiritual experience: *The understanding popped out of the book. That doesn't usually happen, so for me that's more of a spiritual thing because usually if I start reading, I'll ask my higher power to let me grasp what I really need to grasp…that means if I don't understand, it's not made for me to actually get today.*

➢ 2. Meditations & Mindfulness Practice.

- *Taking the time to connect with my higher self* (or higher power), & a chance to *feel their energy and other people's energy.*

- Mindfulness was helpful in assisting them to better appreciate life's moments & themselves, and in understanding themselves more fully.

- Facilitated feelings of gratefulness, happiness, calmness & confidence.

The Spirituality of Mindfulness

➢ While mindfulness lies at the root of Buddhism, Taoism, and yoga, it is also found in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and in Aboriginal & Native American wisdom.

➢ Kabat-Zinn further proposed that an operational working definition is: The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.
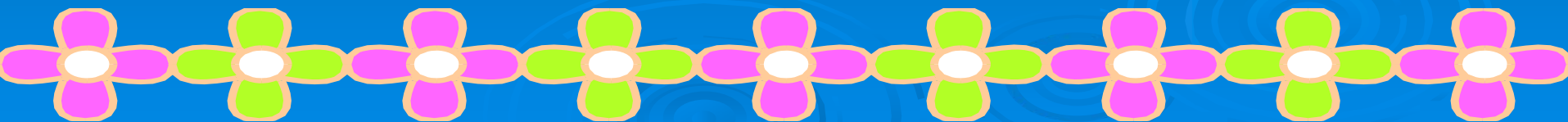
Connectedness

➢ 3. This idea & helping clients to foster connections has been identified as spiritually-influenced helping process: "deep connections" that occur in counselling groups or between practitioner & client.

➢ Group was described: *I found everyone was at ease, more relaxed and at peace than a lot of other groups.*

Making-Meaning

➢ 4. One process that stands out in the analysis because it was discussed in all of the group sessions.

➢ It also entered into the discourse on different layers: More global understandings of why they had problems & what they needed to do. And spirituality helped them make sense of specific exercises.

➢ As they noted, God communicated with them via their writing, reading, and dreams.

Making-Meaning

➢ *I know about my disease but now I have to find what else I was put on this earth for. Right now it's to learn about myself. That's the way I see it in a spiritual way.*

➢ *It continued to flow and I know it was from within me and it wasn't me. And how God, in my writing, came out.* (stream of consciousness writing).
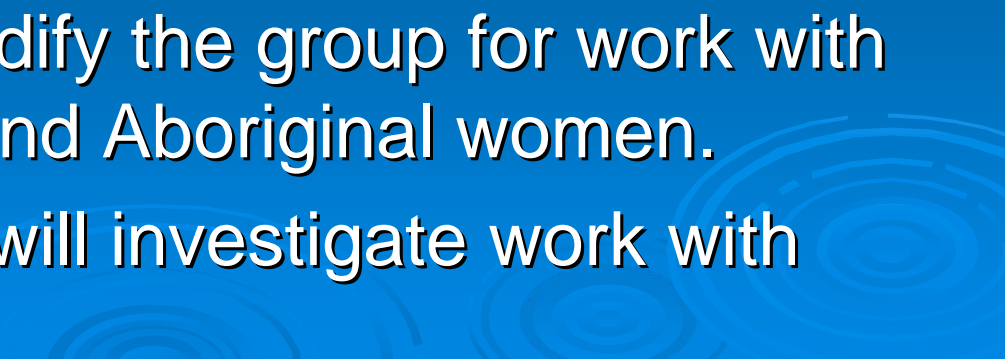
Conclusions

➢ Affirmation of creating space for spiritually-sensitive discussions.

➢ Spirituality as an integral part of making-meaning processes.

➢ Can make room for spirituality, but will be experienced differently. And while processes don't have to be defined as spiritual, they are for some people.
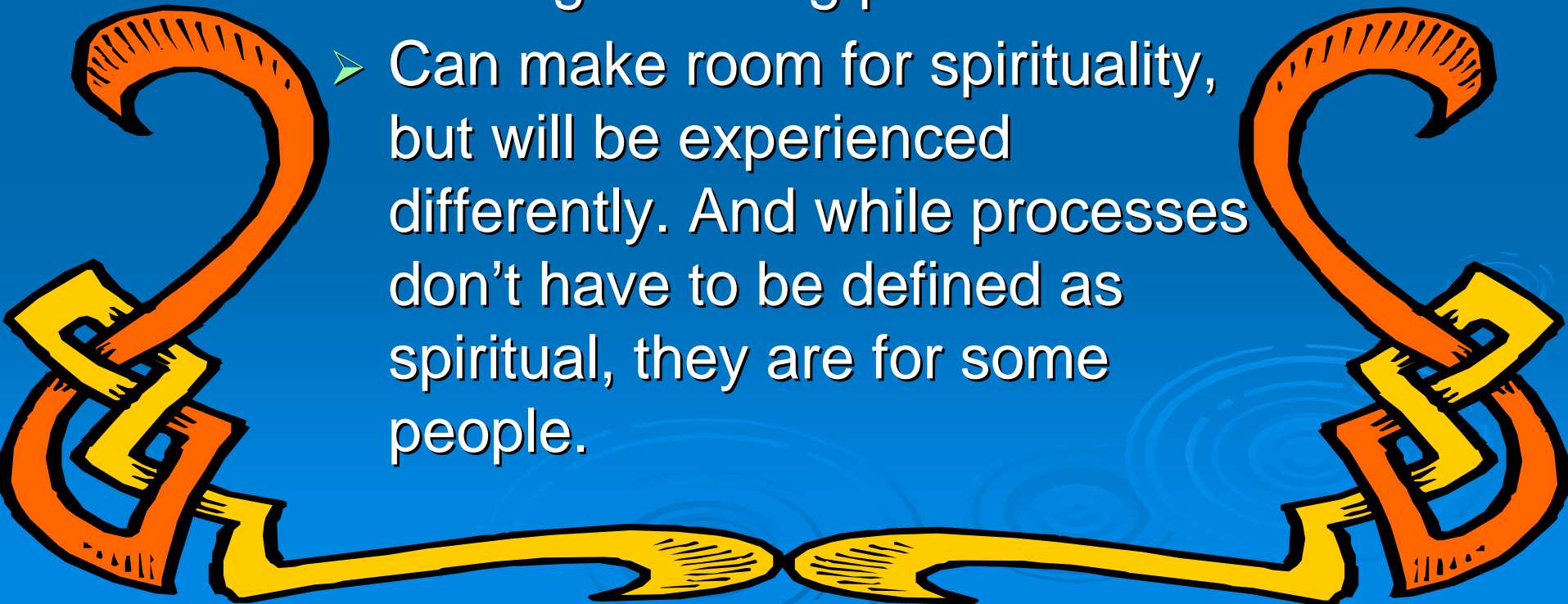
Future Study

➢ Currently, we are facilitating a group with 4 participants who are more experienced with these processes. Focusing on dream analysis and mindfulness meditation.

➢ Group and it's goals are generic enough to be applicable to various clientele.

➢ 3 year plan: modify the group for work with youth-in-care, and Aboriginal women.

➢ Our last phase will investigate work with individuals.