POWER POINT PRESENTATION NOTES

CAN SPIRITUALITY "SAVE" SOCIAL WORK?
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[SLIDE 1] Welcome and thanks for inviting me to share my work!

[SLIDE 2] Background to the question, Can Spirituality "Save" Social Work?

When I initially entered the field of social work, I was excited about its Code of Ethics: claims of humanitarian and egalitarian ideals, belief in the intrinsic worth and dignity of all persons and ethical responsibility to advocate for social justice (CASW, 1994).

These philosophies fit with my personal spiritual values: kindness, honesty, compassion, to treat others as I want to be treated, daily action-oriented way of being and doing. However, the realities of practice (my work in child protection) conflicted with these beliefs and I felt discomfort with the power structures and my own collusion in them and began to feel profound disillusionment and disappointment with the profession.

I discovered that my discomfort and concern around the realities of practice were shared by several social work scholars, such as Carniol (2000), Mulally (2002) and Ife (1997). These authors express concern that social work has failed to accomplish its mission, is in a state of crisis and some even question whether social work has a future at all! This led to my theory that social work needs "saving".

This theory coincided with my discovery of the recent "explosion" of interest in spirituality in social work conferences and literature. It aroused my curiosity and I wondered how the concept of spirituality might alter current practice and the oppressive power structures that we face.

[SLIDE 3]: Methodology: **Feminist Social Research & Discourse Analysis:**

 I drew from feminist theory by incorporating my personal feelings, experiences and opinions throughout the study. I found Michel Foucault's (1980) ideas useful in understanding how discourse, power and resistance operate and how the concept of spirituality might be used as resistance to the current relations of power. Foucault (1980) believed that knowledge is discursively determined, serves to create our identities and determine what is possible or not possible for us.

[SLIDE 4] Method:

- Analysis of 19 spirituality and social work journal articles encompassing a ten year period (1994-2004).

Three questions posed:

1. How do the contemporary authors define/discuss spirituality?
2. What are the problems spirituality is seen to address?
3. What are the solutions to these identified problems as perceived by the authors?

[SLIDE 5] The Social Work Crisis: *Modern Day Dodo Birds*

I examined contemporary discourse around the social work mission & the *crisis* in social work; eg. principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work, yet the new CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is critiqued by Mullaly (2005, p. 1) as having "no philosophical statement or vision".

Mullaly (2005, p. 1) expresses dismay that the statement "the profession of social work is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideas" contained in the 1994 CASW code has been removed. He laments: "Without such social ideas, what is it that inspires social work? What is its 'raison d'etre'?" (p. 1).

Similarly, Ben Carniol (2000) expresses concern that the profession of social work has failed to accomplish its mission and is in a state of "crisis" (p. 5). Other theorists agree: Mullaly (1997, p. 13) states: "the crisis in social work is manifest at all levels and in all areas of social work activity". Ife (1997) indicates that the "construction of social work" is becoming "increasingly out of step with the reality of contemporary practice context" which leads him to question "whether social work has a future, and if so what that future might be" (p. 12). He warns that the "possibility of system collapse must be considered" (p. 36).

Tensions around the crisis include: conflicting roles: caring versus social control;workers pitted against clients; viewed as incompetent by the media; bureaucratic, restrictive and hostile work environments (conservative agendas, budget cut-backs, staff shortages, high caseloads). Hick (2005) notes, "balancing one's beliefs, professional standards and agency rules can be difficult. In this context, the social worker's place of employment can be a source of empowerment or a source of distress" (p. 71).

Workloads are frequently described as impossible, overwhelming and a major cause of increased stress and pressure" (Callahan, et.al 1998). Add to this stress the way social workers are portrayed in the media (one magazine portrayed us as **"modern-day versions of the dodo bird: a species at risk of extinction"** (Canadian Union of Provincial Employees, Winter 2005/06).

However, there is a real discrepancy between how social workers are described in text books as "an enabler, a broker, an advocate, an initiator, a mediator, a negotiator, an activist, an educator, a coordinator, a researcher, a group facilitator and a public speaker" who "…must apply themselves at all times in a professional manner, using all the knowledge and skills they have at their disposal and taking into account the specific

needs of the client and the range of remedies currently available" (Hick, 2006, p. 68). This description makes it sound like we are more like miracle workers!

[SLIDE 6] Miracle worker: "Listen Honey, the title is Social Worker, not Miracle Worker!" - from the website: www.friedsocialworker.com

Contrast this with:

Media depictions which often paint social workers as incompetent; for eg: front-page headlines depicting a composite drawing of an Aboriginal man who confessed to killing a 19 month old female child, left in his care by social workers. The headline read "No child should be in my care" (Times Colonist, 2006). The article paints a horrible picture of negligence and incompetence, not only on the part of social workers, but also on the agency placing the child. Carniol (2000) describes this "crisis" through the words of a front-line worker, who states, "if you ask any of these workers about how they see the future, they'll all tell you the same thing – **I want to get the hell out of here!" (p. 6)**

 [SLIDES 7 & 8] Construction of Social Worker & Client

[SLIDES 9, 10 & 11]: Excluded voices, historical themes, contemporary spiritually aware vs. traditional practice.

Although spirituality is a very timely and hot topic, it is certainly not "new" to social work! This historical context tells us something about the present (what Michel Foucault calls a "history of the present"). Because the Social work mission grew from the social gospel movement, I explore how this movement grew into what we now recognize as professional social work practice.

I examined the personal accounts of three female social gospellers, (Beatrice Brigden, Ethel Dodds Parker and Nellie McClung) which helped me to learn how they viewed spiritually-informed social work and to compare and contrast their experiences from contemporary social workers

I discovered similarities between historical issues and those being experienced by social workers today:

- I was impressed by the early social worker's resistance to convention and their focus on structural causes of inequality and focus on need for social justice in spite of considerable pressure from religious institutions
- Their conflicts with misuses of power impacted their effectiveness and resulted in personal turmoil and emotional exhaustion
- They expressed their disenchantment with the church as the "unwitting perpetrator of abuse", unwillingness to challenge convention and inability to follow Christ's plain teaching
- The church stood off and left them to fight alone, much as the agencies and institutions of contemporary social work tend to do now.

[SLIDES 12 & 13] Identified Problems by Contemporary Authors

Addresses my second question: What are the problems spirituality is seen to address in contemporary literature?

a) MARGINALIZATION & NEGLECT:

- Spiritual knowledge is marginalized because of negative discourses of rigidity, dogmatism, increased role of government, specialization of clergy and social work's desire to become a legitimate profession.
- Spirituality is not considered rational, linear or reductionist, dominated by vagueness, paradox and biases
- Social work is viewed as objective and professional, utilizing scientific explanations (e.g. psychoanalysis, Western medical model and behaviorism) leading social work to be ambivalent about addressing spirituality
- Triggers fear of uncertain territory and fear of social workers being "ignorant"
- Concern that clients are automatically subjected to secular values if social worker doesn't disclose spirituality as a central dimension in their lives

b) LACK OF ETHICAL GUIDELINES & EDUCATION:

- Considerable interest expressed by social work students and practitioners for inclusion of guidelines & education to address spirituality within social work practice and education.
- Urgency for education via academic degree programs (course work & practice) courses, agency in-training and practice supervision (Canda, 2004)
- Ethical concerns because some social workers are already integrating spiritually oriented activities without education and guidelines – danger of inappropriate proselytizing, imposition of religious activities (such as prayer) on clients and bias against various spiritual practices
- Alarming concern re: Social Worker competency, relevant knowledge skills and preparation and ability to make practice decisions that conform to professional ethics
- Most respondents reported little or no content on religion or spirituality in educational programs, despite expressed need
- Concern re: potential harm to clients
- Derezotes (1995) study: most social workers in his study believed that most if not all psycho-social problems relate to spiritual and religious issues, yet social workers are hesitant to address because they lack knowledge and application to practice.

[SLIDE 13] Proposed solutions by Contemporary Authors:

Responses to Question 3: What are the solutions to the identified problems as perceived by the authors?

a) EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION AND GUIDELINES:

- As far back as 1997 scholars were wanting to "bring spirituality out of the closet". Some give specific suggestions via psychodynamic and transpersonal theories, treatment modalities such as meditation and imagery and allowing students structured opportunities to experience them. Theoretical models such as Jung, Aden, Fowler, Wilber, Washburn and Vaughan.
- Concern expressed by one scholar (Rice, 2002) re: uncertain of appropriateness of including spirituality in education and training, clashes with social work's analysis of social justice and structural change, curricula space, inclusivity, lack of academic support and interest, fears of incompatibility with social work's scientific professional base for practice.
- Despite some universities exploring elective courses in spirituality and adapting traditional methods and techniques, negative connotations and misunderstandings remain.
- Some advocate for professors and scholars to be educated as they are hesitant to teach a subject they are not knowledgeable about, nor comfortable with.

b) SPIRITUALITY AS A RESOURCE & TECHNIQUE:

- Viewed as an untapped strength, resource and potential coping source for clients
- Use of spirituality as a "weapon in coping arsenal", expanded opportunity for self discovery
- Specific techniques & tools include: prayer, meditation, contemplation, ritual, scripture study and work within a broader range of consciousness states
- Location of therapeutic encounter to provide a healing context; e.g. use of natural wilderness
- Satir's Mandela for gathering a wealth of info including that of spiritual nature; Bullis' genogram devoted entirely to spiritual issues, Gestalt techniques, journaling bibliotherapy, metaphor.
- Creatively adapt traditional techniques
- Psychodynamic techniques, cognitive/behavioral techniques to replace thinking errors and unhelpful behaviors
- Experiential/humanistic techniques (e.g. talking to God or Goddess in chair)
- Transpersonal intervention (social worker modeling their own development for the client)
- Combine spirituality with psychology – go beyond science to be present to client's experience through images, illusions and metaphors
- Watson model of human care – transpersonal caring relationship allowing for spirit to spirit union between social worker & client.

CONCERNS: few questions about effectiveness of these interventions, rationale for inclusion and theoretical and ethical biases underpinning their use. No specific standards for general guidance of spirituality in social work code of ethics [eg. touching of clients for spiritual based practices such as reiki].

c) SPIRITUALLY SELF AWARE SOCIAL WORKERS:

- Students need to examine and become clear about their own spiritual beliefs so they can separate their beliefs from their clients and are better equipped to accept clients' beliefs even when they are different
- Spiritual aspects of both clients and social workers must be considered: social worker & client need humility, surrender, hope and belief in transcendence, openness, willingness and courage to face pain. Successful treatment is viewed as the ability to transcend or go beyond ordinary limits.

[SLIDE 14] What Surprised Me: is what the authors didn't say!

- didn't speak about how spirituality fits with the current political climate, few outcries against the oppressive system or systemic issues such as poverty, racism and oppression, little acknowledgement of lack of resources, high caseloads or social worker burn-out.

- Minimal emphasis on social justice/change

- Power & Difference: while they talked about accepting & learning from others, they didn't discuss the embracing or centering of difference.

- Spirituality as Resistance: Although their research around the improvement of social worker/client relationship could be viewed as resistance to traditional practice, it does not focus on resisting traditional power structures, so the status quo continues to be maintained.

- I was surprised to find more obvious forms of resistance through the historical accounts of the women in the social gospel movement. I was surprised at how out-spoken they were and the strong structural component (e.g. the link between capitalist system and oppression) and focus on social justice**.**

- I was surprised at forms resistance can take – research itself, disillusionment, anger, and especially creation of public education and awareness (i.e. www.fried social worker.com).

[SLIDE 15] Where to from here?

- Acknowledge complexities and need for social work practice to change

- Agencies, community and societal awareness is crucial in changing discourse around the realities of practice. We need to find creative ways to raise public awareness, develop transparency in terms of the complexities of practice and to include the community in problem-solving. Hopefully, the public would begin to envision spirituality as a way of being/living and view our collective spirituality as a means to alter the hostile and unsupportive environments social workers and clients find themselves in.

- More research re: how spirituality might serve to create a more significant impact on the profession as a whole through <u>collective</u> efforts.

- Guidelines & Education: research what others are learning and teaching and include students/clients/social worker's perspectives.

- Educate/advocate to scholars/professors and brainstorm about how spirituality might be utilized collectively to change discourse and alter social work knowledge and practice.

[SLIDE 16] Epilogue :

One of the few authors in my study to address spirituality on a collective level is Sermabeikian (1994, p. 182) who defines our professional spirituality as:

> The collective inspiration derived from the ideal of human compassion or well-being that drives us to advance our cause. Social workers may have individual aspirations and interests, but there is a sense of unity in working toward an ultimate goal, which includes some transformation of society.

This brings us to my original question – Can Spirituality "Save" Social Work? To which I offer a somewhat tentative, yet optimistic answer: **"<u>perhaps it can</u>"!**

[SLIDE 17] Concluding Questions

[SLIDES 18 & 19] Happy vs. Sad Miracle Worker

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