Spirituality in cross-cultural contexts: Implications for practice and research

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Abstract

Spirituality is an essential, yet underdeveloped, component of cultural competence. Clearly, spirituality of both the client and helping professional has relevance to a clinical setting as conceptualized using the transactional model of cultural identity. Spirituality is often a key component of someone's cultural identity and as such should be considered as one element in the helping process. It is also important to examine how spirituality might be conceptualized in research and how the larger societal context may institutionalize some forms of spirituality while devaluing others. This paper provides examples that reflect the implications of spirituality in both practice and research contexts as well as a critical examination of the role of cultural dynamics, power, and privilege. Additionally, the challenging task of bridging wisdom and research for effective practice will be addressed. This includes making a distinction between evidence based practice, which may tend to privilege some types of spiritualities over others, and practice based evidence which may be more likely to value the wisdom that informs our work and include spiritual dimensions.

Biography

Hilary N. Weaver, DSW (Lakota) is a Professor in the School of Social Work, University at Buffalo (State University of New York). Her teaching, research, and service focus on cultural issues in the helping process with a particular focus on indigenous populations. She currently serves as President of the American Indian Alaska Native Social Work Educators Association and President of the Board of Directors of Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties. Dr. Weaver has presented her work regionally, nationally, and internationally including presenting at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations in

2005, 2006, and 2007. She has numerous publications including the recent text, *Explorations in Cultural Competence: Journeys to the Four Directions* (2005). Dr. Weaver is currently funded by the National Cancer Institute to develop and test a culturally-grounded wellness curriculum for urban Native American youth, the *Healthy Living in Two Worlds* program.

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Introduction

I am honored to be here and have an opportunity to talk about this important topic. I conceptualize spirituality as an understanding and experiencing of the sacred; a realm both intimately intertwined with and distinct from mundane realities. My approach to the topic of spirituality and social work comes from both a professional and personal perspective. Social work is a strong part of my identity, as is my sense of self as a spiritual being, but these paths do not cross easily.

Having a discussion about spirituality, particularly in the contemporary climate where some forms of spirituality are considered acceptable while others are not, can be a risky endeavor. Indeed, while I am a "multiple minority" and may face oppression and disenfranchisements because of my ethnicity and gender, some of my greatest fears are of misunderstandings and persecution for my spiritual beliefs. It is not only in the larger societal context where I feel vulnerable. I also do not feel particularly safe among my social work colleagues. I find that some seek to monopolize and define the term "people of faith" in a way that is narrow and exclusionary.

Although conferences like this one give us an opportunity for dialogue, historically we have rarely engaged in this type of conversation. Spirituality is typically not talked about in the larger society, nor is it a topic that receives much attention in the social work curriculum. I believe that our reluctance to engage in discussions around this topic is rooted in the separation of church and state emphasized in the founding of the United States. Although we often articulate this separation (and thus are reluctant to engage in public dialogues around spirituality), separation of church and state is more myth than reality. Secularism may be stated as a primary principle of governments in North America but in fact the Christian foundations of US and Canadian societies are so engrained that we often do not even recognize their presence.

Spirituality and Cultural Competence

I have built much of my career around examining the concept of cultural competence and it is clear that spirituality has often been left out of this dialogue. Spirituality is a significant part of identity for many people and this is often linked with cultural identity or ethnicity. While identity is a rather complex phenomenon, particularly in contemporary times when we are exposed to so many influences, historically the links between culture and spirituality were clear for indigenous people. For example, I am Lakota. If we were speaking 150 or 200 years ago, telling you that I am Lakota would inform you about my culture, my ethnicity, my language, and my spirituality. Traditionally to be Lakota is to have a certain worldview and belief system. To be Lakota is to know and practice our seven sacred rites and to acknowledge and visit the sites that we hold sacred within our territories. Today, however, times have changed. Some Lakota people like myself try to hold to our traditional values and spirituality. Many other Lakota people have converted to Christianity. In particular many are adherents of the Episcopal faith.

Likewise, historically, if I were to tell you that I am Haudenosaunee this would inform you of my spiritual beliefs. Haudenosaunee literally translates as people of the Longhouse. The Longhouse, like a church or synagogue, is much more than just a structure or house of worship. It represents a particular belief system, way of worship, and way of experiencing the sacred. Historically, if I tell you that I am of the Seneca Beaver Clan it tells you of my values, beliefs, and worldview. In contemporary times Haudenosaunee people follow a range of belief systems and some are no longer followers of Longhouse traditions. In spite of the complexities of modern life, spirituality, culture, and ethnicity are often intimately intertwined and to ignore spirituality in discussions of cultural competence is to leave a major void that hinders both theory and practice.

Spirituality across the Lifespan

Spirituality is a dynamic force relevant across the lifespan. I will give several examples, primarily from my own experience but also including an example from another culture. These examples describe how spirituality plays an important role at different points in life. Indeed, spirituality is relevant even before birth. In my Lakota tradition we believe that children exist as entities prior to their birth into physical bodies. These spirits reside with the Creator and have the ability to identify and choose the families into which they will be born. Children are sacred beings and are more knowledgeable than adults since they have so recently arrived from the Creator. They know things that adults have forgotten.

As I was preparing for the birth of my children it was important that I follow my cultural teachings and spiritual beliefs. After the births I planned to take the umbilical cords and placentas and have them buried at Cattaraugus reservation to tie the children to the land in a traditional indigenous territory. To me this is a beautiful and sacred practice. The Western medical establishment, on the other hand, views placentas and umbilical cords as medical waste to be incinerated. I faced the challenge of circumventing the hospital's policies in order to have my beliefs and practices respected.

As part of planning for the births, I spoke with my doctor who informed me that he would write a letter of support on my behalf which I could present to whomever happened to be present at the time I went into labor. He warned me that in spite of the note, my wishes might or might not be respected. He would, however, try to help me get around the system and the policies of the hospital. When I arrived at the hospital I presented the note and explained my beliefs to the attending nurse. She also expressed a willingness to help me circumvent the system but explained that we would need to be clandestine in our efforts as my request was in violation of hospital policy. While I was glad that I had individual allies willing to break the rules on my behalf I am dismayed that no one saw any reason to challenge the hospital policy that violated my belief system and no doubt the beliefs of some others who might give birth there.

Social workers are known for their capacity as change agents. Certainly a hospital that claims to respect cultural diversity could be persuaded to take steps to respect and embrace a variety of birthing practices. I would like to think that social workers could lead the charge toward this type of change.

For a second example, I would like to share a story from outside my culture; one from the Hmong, a tribal people from Southeast Asia. This example comes from the award winning book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* by Anne Fadiman (1997). This book describes the story of a Hmong refugee family relocated to California in the wake of United States involvement in Southeast Asia. The Hmong are an indigenous hill tribe found in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. As people intimately familiar with the jungles of Vietnam, many of them were recruited to serve in the United States military during the war. When the United States ended its involvement in Vietnam and Saigon fell in 1975, the Hmong were at particular risk for persecution from the new communist government because of their support for the United States. Due to this imminent danger, many were allowed to come to the United States as refugees. Such is the case of the family in the Fadiman book.

Fadiman describes the life of a Hmong family in California with many children, one of whom was very sick. This young girl would come to be identified by Western medical practitioners as having a rare and particularly severe form of epilepsy. As far as the family was concerned the young girl's spirit had been frightened and left her body when one of her siblings slammed a door. The title of the book comes from a graphic description of her seizures. In chapter after chapter it is painfully clear that the Western medical establishment and the family are operating under two vastly different belief systems. The medical practitioners have a biological explanation and biochemical treatments designed to address a problem in her brain. The Hmong family members have a spiritual explanation and spiritual and herbal remedies designed to attract her spirit back to its rightful place. These two belief systems could not be more at odds with each other. The family's

belief system and their shamanic spiritual practices are dismissed and devalued. The belief system undergirding the Western medical establishment is backed by power and the force of law.

Ultimately the family was charged with medical neglect, the daughter removed from the family and put into foster care, in large part because they followed their own beliefs rather than those of the foreign society that they found themselves in. After years of cultural misunderstandings and language barriers, in one small bright moment a social worker asked the family what they believed caused their daughter's problems and what might help alleviate them. No one had ever asked these questions before or considered how the family's culture and spiritual belief system might impact the situation or treatment regime. Unfortunately this was too little too late and the child ultimately died as the seizures intensified. Her last days, however, were spent in the care of her loving family who adored and pampered her to the end while remaining bewildered by a medical establishment that operated so differently from their own belief system.

In another example of the importance of spirituality throughout the lifecycle, I'll share the story of my father-in-law's final days as a hospice patient in my home. After a long, drawn-out fight with cancer that spread throughout his body, he could no longer live on his own. He came to live with me, my husband, and our children ages 2 ½ and 9 months old. When the hospice team did the intake interview they recorded a lot of information and emphasized what a stressful process the dying experience is. They said that this is an important time for us to seek support and solace from a church. I replied that we were followers of the Longhouse faith. To this they just replied, "oh." It was clear to me that they only saw support and solace as coming from a specifically Christian tradition. This was not seen as something valuable or even possible from our own faith tradition. No other mention was made of spirituality or support as we entered this difficult process.

In a related story, my daughter Iris, who was 2 ½ at the time, had begun to show indications of stress as her grandfather's health declined. They had always been very close. Because of my work schedule, when my husband took his father to chemotherapy and other

medical appointments the children came along too. When my daughter complained of physical symptoms I took her to the pediatrician who found no medical reason for her complaints of ear and tooth pain. He asked if anyone else in the family was sick. At first I thought of contagious diseases and replied that she had not been around anyone who was sick. I then realized that her symptoms were not the result of a physical problem but reflected the pain she felt as her grandfather became sicker and moved toward death. In addition to complaining of pain she began crawling again instead of walking and started sucking her thumb after having stopped this practice several months earlier.

When hospice offered grief counseling for the family during the last few weeks of my father-in-law's life, I asked if Iris could receive counseling since she seemed to be expressing the symptoms for the family. Iris was extremely verbal for her age and while the hospice counselors weren't used to working with someone that young they agreed to provide the services, with me attending each session. The counseling was provided by a social worker and was generally good but lacked any spiritual dimension. The social worker never inquired as to our belief system or what we told the children about death.

It seems to me that the end of life is one of the most important times for social workers to address spirituality. This, along with birth, is the time when we are closest to the spiritual realm. At one point the social worker, using gentle and reassuring tones, tried to get Iris to recognize the finality of death (as the social worker saw it). She was saying that when someone is dead they are gone and that is that. In fact, that perspective is quite different from our family's belief system and the belief systems of many other families as well. Many spiritual traditions recognize life after death in some sort of spiritual realm or heaven. We believe that death may be the end of the physical body but that the spirit continues. The social worker was contradicting and undermining our belief system as part of the counseling process. As a participant in the process I was able to intervene and express our beliefs, rather than have Iris confused by an authority figure contradicting our teachings. I made it clear to Iris that her recently deceased

grandfather, as well as my father who died many years before she was born, were both watching over her and it was perfectly acceptable for her to see them in her dreams, include them in her prayers, and speak to them any time that she desired.

All of these stories are examples of how minority belief systems and spiritual practices are often undermined and marginalized. Social workers and other human service professionals are often part of this process that legitimizes some beliefs while ignoring or marginalizing others. We must recognize that there are many different ways of understanding and experiencing the spiritual. I do not think that human beings are in a place to judge the superiority of one spiritual belief system over others. While we all have our own values and ways of spiritual expression this does not give us license to devalue the beliefs of others.

The Transactional Model of Cultural Identity

The spirituality of the helping professional is a relevant dimension in the helping relationship. I firmly believe in the transactional model of cultural identity articulated by James Green (1999), an anthropologist affiliated with the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. This model seeks to move beyond categorical models of identity where individuals of a particular culture are expected to possess a particular laundry-list of traits, i.e., a Chinese client is expected to espouse a group oriented, hierarchical value system that prioritizes men and elders. If this Chinese client does not meet these expectations the person is somehow less Chinese. In my experience, this type of linear model does not adequately reflect the complexities of human identity. People don't fit well into boxes.

The transactional model, on the other hand, emphasizes that difference does not reside within one person but rather is the dynamic interaction between people. If diversity is conceptualized as resting in the client or "other," that positions the helping professional as the "norm"; a rather arrogant position to take.

Many years ago I had an example come up in a class that illustrates the transactional model well. I was teaching a class in cultural diversity to undergraduate social work students in a small northern Idaho community with very limited ethnic diversity. What the town did have, however, were international students. As a semester long exercise, I paired my students with international partners. They were to meet weekly, could do any activity of their choice and keep a journal about their experiences and feelings.

One of my students began the class by strongly stating her identity as a White, middle aged, divorced mother from a Christian background with a strong feminist orientation. As it so happened, her partner for the class exercise was a young Pakistani Muslim man. Early in the semester his mother (who still resided in Pakistan) began the process of choosing a bride for him. The couple would never meet before she arrived in Idaho for the wedding. The prospective groom had no qualms about this as he knew his mother would choose a suitable bride. The impending wedding served as the foundation for many interesting discussions between the partners.

The transactional model provides a dynamic lens for examining how these two interacted (and in turn how a social worker might interact with a client.) It would be easy to fall into the categorical trap and simply label the young Muslim man and his beliefs as "different" thus reinforcing the power and presumed normalcy of a White American Christian perspective. The social work profession has fallen into this trap too often and practitioners would do well to reflect more on how their own backgrounds influence the way they interact with others, including clients.

Power Dynamics

Power dynamics are an inherent part of the helping relationship. Some of these dynamics are a reflection of power relations in the larger society. For example, in United States and Canadian societies a woman of color typically possesses less power than a White man. This

pre-existing dynamic may carry over into the helping relationship and a female client may, consciously or unconsciously, act in a deferential manner toward a male social worker. Likewise, a White male client paired with a social worker who is a woman of color may, consciously or unconsciously, act assertively and devalue the social worker's expertise.

Although social workers often do not feel powerful, they do possess power as a result of the authority vested them by virtue of their expertise and association with bureaucracies perceived to have significant influence over a client's life. Clients, on the other hand, are often experiencing difficult life situations where they feel powerless and vulnerable. In spite of many social workers' attempts at fostering egalitarian relationships with their clients, the fact remains that a social worker's professional judgment may be the deciding factor in whether a client's children are removed from the home or whether a client is deemed eligible for a particular service. We cannot escape the fact that social workers do have power and may be perceived to have even more power by clients. The power inherent in the social worker-client relationship may also interact with preexisting societal dynamics.

We must also recognize that differential power dynamics exist among different spiritualities. Some spiritual traditions are considered more "mainstream" (i.e., familiar and therefore more acceptable) than others and are vested with a sense of "normalcy" because of their association with people in power in society. Both historically and in contemporary times, Christianity has been the religion of most political leaders in both the United States and Canada. It tends to be the religion of many policy makers at all levels. This reinforces the idea of its normalcy and other spiritual traditions, if they are thought of at all, are typically perceived as different (an unfortunate reflection of categorical ways of thinking.) In United States and Canadian societies non-mainstream forms of spirituality are virtually always at a power disadvantage.

These dynamics tend to be cumulative or have a snowball effect. The clients that social workers often encounter are typically disenfranchised in multiple ways. In particular, a female

client of color who participates in a minority faith tradition can be easily disempowered by a social worker who comes from more of a "majority" background in terms of faith, ethnicity, education, etc. As helping professionals, we need to recognize these particular dynamics, reflect on how the transactional approach may be relevant, and thoughtfully and consciously proceed with our work rather than blunder forward disrespectfully. Too many helping professionals are oblivious to power in their work, thus preventing them from effectively engaging with or helping some clients and perhaps even harming some.

Recognizing our Reactions to Difference

Self-awareness is a key component of cultural competence. Likewise, it is important for helping professionals to recognize how they react to people who espouse a spirituality that differs from their own. For example, I remember a client that I worked with many years ago. Our primary work focused on improving her strained relationship with her son. During one session she disclosed her distress over the fact that her son wanted to attend a Halloween party at his school. As a Jehovah Witness this activity was in conflict with her faith and she did not want him to participate in this school sponsored activity. On the other hand, her 8 year old son wanted to fit in with his peers and enjoy this day that so many others were celebrating. My initial reaction was to minimize my client's concerns and to encourage her to allow her son to participate in Halloween festivities. This, however, would devalue her belief system. My initial reaction came from my own feelings that Halloween was harmless and fun. Helping professionals need to be self-aware and constantly vigilant that our own belief systems do not serve as the standard for our work with clients.

I have found that some forms of spirituality have been so demonized that it is difficult for non-practitioners of these belief systems to recognize them as legitimate spiritual practices. In particular I find that many of the syncretic religions like Espiritismo and Voodoo practiced in the Caribbean and among people that have migrated from the Caribbean tend to conjure up

Hollywood images of the walking dead from some B movie rather than a contemporary spirituality. Typically we react to a caricature or stereotype of a belief system without understanding anything of the actual belief system or its practitioners. These fear reactions can often be intractable but I have found one technique to be helpful when I introduce discussions of this sort with my students.

I begin by telling them of a strange and exotic belief system. I warn them that it may sound barbaric, gory, and disgusting but reassure them that this is an actual spiritual belief system practiced by many devout followers around the world. Although it seems hard to believe, the followers of this belief system hold regular ceremonies where they drink blood and eat flesh; and it is not just any blood and flesh. They claim that it is the blood and flesh of their savior! While some of my students have looks of horror on their faces as the story unfolds, a smile of recognition comes across the faces of others. They recognize this as a beautiful and restorative ritual of Communion practiced in many Christian churches.

The point being, words have the ability to twist, distort, and make any belief system sound ugly. When someone recognizes how badly a few words can distort their own values and belief system, they may think twice when they hear similar descriptions of the beliefs of others. In fact, norms are all relative. What seem like normal and positive expressions of faith to one person may seem bizarre to someone else. We must also remember that power dynamics figure into what is considered to be "normal". People who have power tend to have their spiritualities normalized while those without power may have their faith traditions marginalized or demonized.

We would do well to keep this in mind as we work with clients from different faiths. Our perceptions of our own belief system as normal may lead us to view others outside our faith tradition as abnormal. I wonder if we as helping professionals might have a tendency to validate and support clients with a spiritual belief system similar to our own. Likewise, there might be a tendency to fear, marginalize, and disempower clients who have a faith tradition different than

our own. As helping professionals we have a responsibility to constantly monitor our feelings and reactions and their implications for the helping relationship.

The Invisible Institutionalization of Spirituality

Although we are typically not conscious of the fact, some forms of spirituality have become institutionalized while conversely others are marginalized and invalidated. This all goes back to earlier reflections on norms and who has the power to dictate them.

Several years ago I had the privilege of traveling in the Middle East. I spent some time in Jerusalem, a place sacred to three of the major world religions (and possibly others of which I am not aware.) When I travel, I enjoy shopping. In Jerusalem I needed to be conscious of which days shops were open. Muslim owned shops were closed on Fridays. Jewish owned shops were closed on Saturdays. Christian owned shops were closed on Sundays. My shopping expeditions required an awareness not often needed in societies dominated by a single or primary faith tradition. In Jerusalem it was necessary for people of different faith traditions to be aware of and have some knowledge of each other, perhaps because there is somewhat of a balance of power (however precarious) in that area. In many other areas, awareness of traditions seems non-existent because one faith tradition has most of the power and those with power can afford to be oblivious to those without.

We could all benefit from a greater awareness of the spiritual traditions of others. I was teaching a class a few years ago and two of my students were Muslim immigrants from Middle Eastern countries. One was struggling with the class a bit and needed some additional help. I suggested that she come see me during my office hours. She was rather hesitant. With what appeared to be considerable embarrassment she explained that time would be difficult for her because my office hours conflicted with one of the Muslim calls to prayer. Had I been a bit more tuned in to her needs I might have recognized her struggle earlier and saved her some

embarrassment. I quickly suggested a mutually agreeable meeting time. I hope that next time I will not be so oblivious to someone else's spiritual needs.

The university where I teach (University at Buffalo, State University of New York) is one of the few universities in the country that recognizes the major Jewish holidays as days when classes should not be held. Although well intentioned, this recognition is less than adequate. Jewish holidays begin at sundown. Of course the timing of sundown varies at different times of the year. University at Buffalo takes the position that time off for Jewish holidays will begin at 6:00 pm. Of course sometimes the sun sets before 6:00 pm and those who need to make preparations for the holiday must do so before sundown. Also, the additional holidays recognized in Orthodox Judaism are not on the university calendar. While the university makes an effort to recognize Jewish holidays as well as Christian ones, this is done in a way that does not adequately reflect the needs of many Jewish students, staff, and faculty. Muslim holidays, typically based on a lunar calendar, are not accommodated in the university calendar. There is only a footnote encouraging faculty to be sensitive to the spiritual observances of Muslim students. It is interesting to note that Jewish holidays (also typically based on a lunar calendar) are listed on the university schedule while Muslim holidays are not. I believe this is a reflection of who holds the power to dictate the university schedule.

Although we rarely think of it, many of the schedules typically found in the United States and Canada are based on a Christian foundation. Sunday, the Christian day of worship, is institutionalized as part of the weekend. While for many it isn't necessarily the day of worship and rest it was intended to be, it is rare that classes are offered or clients seen on Sundays. Likewise, Christmas and Easter, two significant Christian holidays, are often "protected" and those who celebrate those holidays (unless serving in critical capacities) rarely have to ask permission to have a day off from their agency or school. People who are followers of these "set aside" days are privileged and have no need to ask for "special treatment", i.e., days off for religious observances. On the other hand, those of us who follow a faith whose holidays are not

published on a calendar are always in a position of requesting time off to fulfill our spiritual obligations. Some faith traditions, like the Longhouse of the Haudenosaunee have ceremonies that last for an extended period of time. For example, Midwinter ceremonies are nine days long. A nine day ceremonial observance is outside the experience of many people familiar only with Christian holidays that tend to be of shorter duration. This is something for supervisors and agency directors to consider in respecting the diverse spiritual practices of their employees. Calendars institutionalize some days as holidays. It is worthwhile reflecting on who has the power to decide which dates are recognized on a calendar and how this institutionalizes and privileges some faith traditions over others. Reflections on power and privilege are an important element of understanding diverse faith traditions.

Research, Different Ways of Knowing, Wisdom, and Spirituality

The conference description includes the terms research, different ways of knowing, wisdom, and spirituality. I find it very challenging to have these words all in the same sentence. In fact, it has been my experience that research often excludes different ways of knowing, wisdom, and spirituality.

At my university I serve as a member of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board. In this capacity I review a wide variety of research proposals. One of the proposals that I reviewed sought to measure the spirituality of counseling students. The researchers seemed oblivious to the fact that their survey instrument was biased against many non-mainstream religions (and non-Christian religions in general). The researchers (apparently unwittingly) used common Christian norms as a way to measure all faith traditions. For example, they asked about attendance at weekly religious services. While it is common for various Christian denominations to hold weekly services, this is not the norm for many other spiritual traditions. There is no such thing as weekly services in Longhouse or Lakota traditions. I consider myself to be strong in my faith. It is a significant part of my life but were I to complete

this survey I suspect that checking a box that indicated that I did not attend weekly services or even monthly services would be interpreted that I was somehow less religious than someone who did attend weekly services. Likewise, I don't think the survey would yield meaningful data for a follower of Islam. A Muslim man who attends weekly services is not likely to be considered devout since the Muslim call to prayer happens multiple times daily. Also standards for spiritual devotion vary by gender in Islam as the expectations for a devout Muslim woman are considerably different than for a devout Muslim man. Standards also differ for men and women followers of Orthodox Judaism. In short, this research instrument that I reviewed would not adequately reflect spiritual devotion for followers of many of the world religions; instead it used a benchmark taken from Christianity and inappropriately (arrogantly) applied it to all.

This same survey instrument also asked how often respondents read religious publications. Once again, this is a biased question, given that not all spiritual traditions have a heavy focus on the written word. While Jews, Christian, and Muslims are often referred to as "People of the Book", the written word is not a standard appropriate for judging all spiritual traditions. Not all faith traditions have something comparable to the Torah, Bible, or Koran. That does not, however, make these traditions and their followers any less devote or inferior in any way to people that have the written word as primary components in their traditions. I worry that other research projects like the one just described may also contain biases against many faith traditions.

As indicated above, not all faith traditions are recognized and respected as such. Some are devalued as superstition. In my capacity on the Institutional Review Board I have seen several research proposals designed to explore earth-centered spiritual practices such as Wicca and other forms of Paganism. These proposals are often met with smirks and bizarre assertions about what "those people" might be doing. It is unfortunate that in an academic environment where presumably people have been exposed to a variety of thought as part of their educational process, mockery of some spiritual traditions is considered acceptable.

Recently I served as a key informant and reviewed some prototypical assessment tools designed to measure spirituality for Native Americans. While I was happy to be included in the project, as I reviewed the instruments they appeared to include many of the mainstream biases of other tools. They seemed to employ a hierarchical, linear understanding of the spiritual. It is challenging even to identify terminology comfortable for the diverse group known as Native Americans. Some are comfortable with terms such as God but for others this reflects a narrow Christian understanding of spirituality rather than traditional ways. Although I made many comments to the researchers on improving their tool, ultimately I believe that a standardized instrument will always fall short in assessing spirituality and the limitations of this type of instrument are likely to outweigh its benefits.

As researchers venture forth into the study of spirituality they will find many challenges ahead of them. I hope that those who choose this path will continue to reflect on what they bring to the process (the transactional model) and will be fully aware of how power and privilege have been institutionalized in terms of spirituality in our society. Only with constant monitoring for biases can we hope to have meaningful research in this area.

Part of the conference theme refers to "Bridging wisdom and research for effective practice." I believe that we will need a very long bridge. These ideas do not co-exist easily. In fact, research is often touted as superior to, and a replacement for, practice wisdom. As noted above, research and spirituality may be particularly uneasy bedfellows as spirituality often defies quantification, operationalization, and the defining of variables so often associated with research. Being open and inclusive of various spiritualities may be an aspiration for some scholars and practitioners but this neither reflects the current state of human services nor is a priority for many researchers.

Indeed, I wonder if we might be moving in the opposite direction. The current push toward evidence-based practice in social work is likely to reinforce power bastions that continue to exclude a broad and inclusive approach to spirituality. The evidence typically generated by

research is based on the particular people included in the study. We tend to forget the limitations of studying a particular type of person and are quick to generalize inappropriately to others.

There is, however, an appropriate alternative that I have heard some scholars and researchers begin to emphasize; practice-based evidence. This involves examining current practices (which may include spiritual dimensions) and gathering evidence about what is effective. In other words, learning from practice as a guiding framework rather than applying research findings derived from one group uncritically to others. Practice-based evidence is a good way to value the wisdom that informs our work. Using this approach is far more likely to include spiritual dimensions.

Conclusion

Spirituality is a topic often neglected in social work, as you well know. This conference has brought people together from across the continent to provide an important venue for this taboo discussion. I use the word taboo deliberately here, as I think it is particularly fitting. As we use the word in daily life it often means something that we want to stay away from; perhaps not even talk about it. That is the approach that many helping professionals have taken when it comes to addressing spirituality in the helping relationship. The word taboo comes from the Polynesian term *tapu*, a term for something sacred and powerful. This more accurately reflects how meaningful it can be to include spirituality in our work with clients. For many, it is a central part of their being and is particularly meaningful in difficult times. As you continue your reflections and explorations of the place of spirituality and social work, keep in mind the power and privilege that have come to be associated with some spiritual expressions and recognize that they must not monopolize the concept of faith; rather, they are just some of the multitude of spiritual expressions found in our diverse society and world.

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