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An Inclusive Definition of Spirituality for Social Work Education and Practice

Evan Senreich

A formidable body of recent literature advocates the incorporation of spirituality into the bio-psycho-social framework of social work education and practice. No consistent conceptualization of spirituality has been developed, however, that can be used with all clients and that is fully consonant with social work values as taught in schools of social work. Certain culturally derived perspectives regarding spirituality have been endorsed in social work literature in a way that does not fully honor each client's view of the nature of existence. This article proposes an inclusive definition of spirituality for social work education that considers every client's perceptions regarding what is unknowable as equally valid. Case examples, suitable for classroom education, are presented.

Over the past two decades, a great deal of attention has been given to the incorporation of aspects of spirituality into social work education and practice. Textbooks focusing exclusively on the intersection of spirituality and social work practice have become fairly commonplace (e.g., Abels, 2000; Becvar, 1998; Bullis, 1996; Canda, 1998; Canda & Furman, 2010; Canda & Smith, 2001; Coates, Graham, & Swartzentruber, 2007; Crisp, 2010; Crompton, 1998; Cunningham, 2012; Derezotes, 2006b; Groen, Graham, & Coholic, 2012; Holloway & Moss, 2010; Lee, Ng, Leung, & Chan, 2009; Lindsay, 2002; Martin & Martin, 2002; Matthews, 2009; Moody, 2005; Scales et al., 2002; Van Hook, Hugen, & Aguilar, 2001). Entering the key words *spirituality* and *social work* into the search engine PsycINFO to locate articles on this subject from January 1, 1990, through January 1, 2012, yielded a list of 781 documents. Much of this literature advocates greater attention to spirituality as a vitally important human element in working with clients from a strengths-based social work perspective.

In spite of this wealth of literature, it appears that both social work educators and practitioners are finding it challenging to integrate the concept of spirituality into a consistent bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework for both assessing and intervening with all clients. This difficulty is reflected in the vast majority of generalist social work practice textbooks. Each of the following commonly used comprehensive practice textbooks devotes only a few pages to spirituality: Birkenmaier, Berg-Weger, and Dewees (2011); Boyle, Hull, Mather, Smith, and Farley (2009); Compton, Galaway, and Cournoyer (2005); Gambrill (2006); Gitterman and Germaine

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(2008); Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, and Strom-Gottfried (2013); Johnson and Yanca (2010); Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2012); Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois (2011); Shulman (2012); and Timberlake, Zajicek-Farber, and Sabatino (2008). Although some of these textbooks discuss spirituality in the context of respecting clients' values and culture, they do not meaningfully integrate working with clients' spirituality into their chapters on assessment and intervention strategies.

Three contemporary generalist social work practice textbooks do give greater attention to the subject of spirituality. Saleebey's (2013) strengths-based practice textbook contains a chapter by Edward Canda (pp. 79–96) that is a heartfelt recounting of Dr. Canda's use of his own spirituality in living with cystic fibrosis. In the rest of this textbook, however, concepts of spirituality are only marginally integrated into the general discussion of assessment and intervention from a strengths perspective. Sheafor and Horejsi (2012) include, as part of a chapter about working with vulnerable populations, a section that addresses many salient issues related to working with a client's spirituality. Spirituality is thus not framed as a universal human element, but as a concern of a specific population. A combination textbook/workbook by Zastrow (2013), *The Practice of Social Work*, has a chapter titled "Spirituality and Religion in Social Work Practice" with many useful exercises for students on this subject.

In a review of the literature, Sheridan (2009) reported that numerous studies have found that a majority of social workers in the United States use a substantial number of spirituality-based interventions with clients in their practice. However, Sheridan also cited 15 studies in which 66% to 89% of social workers reported having received little or no instruction during their education concerning the use of spirituality with clients, that the workers' own spirituality influenced their use of interventions, and that there was no evidence that workers were adhering to specific ethical guidelines in this regard. In a national survey, Canda and Furman (2010) found that approximately two thirds of social workers believed that members of the profession should become more knowledgeable about spiritual matters. It therefore appears that a majority of social workers have a desire to work within the context of their clients' spiritual belief systems and often do this in their practice, but they have not received a comprehensive practice framework in their social work education to do so.

PURPOSE

A major premise of this article is that a person's subjective relationship with what is unknowable about existence is a universal aspect of being human that is not adequately covered in the bio-psycho-social framework traditionally used in social work education. This article therefore advocates the use of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework to conceptualize the issues of all clients. However, this article also asserts that current definitions of spirituality in the social work literature have fundamental problems, which have resulted in the lack of a full embrace of the incorporation of spirituality into social work education and which have led to considerable confusion about how to do this in a way consonant with the values and knowledge base of social work practice.

The two major difficulties in the way spirituality is conceptualized in the field of social work are summarized as follows:

1. Although recent definitions of spirituality offer social workers and students many rich perspectives, they are not fully inclusive, and they have created a dualistic view of spirituality,

in which a person is “more” or “less” spiritual. Rather than viewing each person’s subjective viewpoint of his or her relationship to the unknown as a valid spiritual perspective, some ways of viewing a person’s relationship to the unknown are defined as spiritual, whereas others are not. The current definitions of spirituality are constructs grounded in common points of view about the nature of existence that are actually individual spiritual belief systems in themselves, and do not validate each person’s unique relationship to what is unknowable. These definitions are therefore not completely in accordance with the value of inclusiveness that is emphasized in social work education, but rather appear to advocate certain perspectives about existence.

2. *Spirituality*, as defined in the social work literature, is far too amorphous a term, as it incorporates an array of constructs that are associated with culturally derived points of view about spirituality. Rather than clearly defining spirituality as each person’s unique relationship to what is unknowable about existence, conceptualizations of spirituality have incorporated a range of ideas associated with prevalent spiritual belief systems. This has resulted in a confusing framework for students and a fragmented, noninclusive way of assessing and working with a client’s spirituality in social work settings.

It is the purpose of this article to examine the difficulties inherent in the current conceptualizations of spirituality used in social work education, and to propose a new inclusive definition of spirituality that can be used as a conceptual framework in the classroom.

STRENGTHS OF CURRENT LITERATURE

There are significant strengths to be acknowledged in the literature of the past two decades regarding the incorporation of spirituality into social work education and practice. First, the recognition that the historic bio-psycho-social model utilized in social work education and practice had for many years omitted a fundamental aspect of human experience is a major contribution of the writings on this subject. The roots of the social work profession, such as the charity organization societies, the settlement house movement, and the social welfare agencies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were strongly influenced by Christian and, to a lesser extent, Jewish religious traditions, with their own set of spiritual perspectives (Barker, 2007; Davis, 1967; Lee & Barrett, 2007; Lindsay, 2002; Meinart, 2009; Modesto, Weaver, & Flannelly, 2006; Phillips & Straussner, 2002; Sullivan, 2009). With the professionalization of social work, however, an emphasis on science came to dominate the profession, and spiritual points of view were deemed to be outside the domain of the field of social work. Beginning in the 1920s, psychoanalytic and other psychotherapy perspectives were increasingly incorporated into social work practice (Cowley, 1996; Goldstein, 1995; Lindsay, 2002; Meinart, 2009; Sullivan, 2009), and this further excluded spiritual ideas from the profession. Therefore, a human being’s fundamental struggle with living in a universe where the meaning of life and death is unknowable was divorced from almost all social work theory and practice, and not addressed in social work education.

Second, the profession’s history of avoiding a genuine engagement with clients’ spiritual belief systems has contradicted its ethical standards regarding cultural competence and respect for social diversity (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). In contrast, contemporary literature on spirituality and social work focuses on the importance of students and social workers developing an understanding and respect for the diverse spiritual and religious perspectives of their clients,

and, when appropriate, applying these perspectives to their work (Ai, 2006; Barker, 2007; Hodge, 2006; Hodge & Bushfield, 2006; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009; Rothman, 2009).

Third, recent literature on spirituality and social work has advocated an examination by students and social workers of their own spiritual and religious points of view and how these affect their work with clients, particularly in cases of dissonance between the practitioner's and the client's belief systems (Hodge & Bushfield, 2006; Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; Rothman, 2009; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2012). As social work education has historically emphasized social workers increasing their self-awareness and identifying countertransference reactions in their work with clients, these writings are very important in adding a spiritual dimension to this process.

Fourth, the current literature emphasizes the need for social workers to assess whether the use of spiritual and religious resources in the community may be helpful for their clients, and advocates referring clients to these resources when appropriate (Bullis, 1996; Canda & Furman, 2010; Furman & Benson, 2001; Hodge, 2001; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2012). Thus, students are increasingly being taught to explore spiritual and religious resources when performing assessments according to an ecological framework.

Last, there has been much recent literature advocating the utilization of interventions by social workers that have historically been associated with spiritual and religious traditions. Discussion of practices such as meditation, prayer, visualization, use of ritual, affirmations, spiritual dream-work, and mindfulness has become increasingly prevalent in the social work and related counseling literature (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2008; Bullis, 1996; Canda & Furman, 2010; Carlson & Larkin, 2009; Coholic, 2006; Derezotes, 2006b; Heyman, Buchanan, Musgrave, & Menz, 2006; Hodge, 2001; Hodge & Bushfield, 2006; Lindsay, 2002; Plante, 2009; Rice, 2002; Russel, 2006; Sheridan, 2004; Sherman & Siporin, 2008; Vohra-Gupta, Russell, & Lo, 2007). The incorporation of these methods into social work education and practice is a positive development, enhancing the repertoire of interventions that workers can use with their clients.

DIFFICULTIES OF CURRENT DEFINITIONS OF SPIRITUALITY FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Despite the aforementioned strengths of recent social work literature regarding integrating spiritual perspectives into social work education and practice, there are difficulties with how spirituality is defined in relation to the core values of the profession. Authors have discussed how spirituality is a very difficult concept to define, since it is multidimensional, defies clear-cut boundaries, and has unique personal meanings for different people (Barker, 2007; Canda & Furman, 2010; Carroll, 1998; Crisp, 2010; Miller & Thoreson, 2003; Zapf, 2008). Aldridge (2000), in his book regarding spirituality and modern medicine, cites at least 24 definitions of spirituality. The challenge, however, is to find a definition of spirituality for social work students that fully conforms to social work values and that can be used when working with all clients. It would therefore be important that a definition of spirituality for social work education meet the following two criteria:

1. First, it should be an inclusive definition of spirituality that completely respects the diverse belief systems of each and every client, reflecting the values social work students are

encouraged to develop. This definition must not, in itself, assume that any point of view about existence is the only valid one.

2. Second, this definition should be clear and specific enough so that social work students understand exactly what it means to assess and work with a client's spirituality. Although spirituality is a complex construct that has been conceptualized in many different ways, a definition for use in social work education should provide an accessible guiding framework that students can utilize in their work with all clients. Furthermore, if spirituality is to be added to the profession's traditional bio-psycho-social model, then it should contribute a new and distinct perspective, one that is not already present in that model.

Although the definitions currently being used in the field of social work do capture different important aspects of common conceptualizations of spirituality, they do not fully meet these two criteria. For example, Hodge (2001) states: "*Spirituality* is defined as a relationship with God, or whatever is held to be the Ultimate (for example, a set of sacred texts for Buddhists) that fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life" (p. 204). Although this definition is clear and specific, it does not apply to clients who do not have such a relationship with God or the Ultimate, and thus could lead to a dualistic view regarding who is or is not spiritual. The definition itself fosters a specific spiritual view of existence, that there is indeed a God or an Ultimate.

Conversely, Zastrow (2013), in his social work practice textbook/workbook, cites Miley (1992), who defines spirituality as "the general human experience of developing a sense of meaning, purpose, and morality" (p. 424). This definition is indeed inclusive of all clients and respects issues of diversity, but lacks clarity as to how assessing spirituality is unique from what is usually assessed according to social work's bio-psycho-social perspective.

Derezotes (2006b) uses multiple definitions of spirituality in his textbook, *Spiritually Oriented Social Work Practice*, but they tend to lack specificity and are therefore difficult for social work students to utilize in a consistent way when working with all clients. For example, Derezotes writes: "Human spirituality can be simply understood as a person's desire for and expression of loving connection with everything" and "Spirituality can be seen as the individual's sense of connectedness, meaning, peace, consciousness, purpose, and service that develops across the life span" (p. 3). Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of spirituality for social work education and practice can be found in Canda and Furman's (2010) textbook, *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice*:

Spirituality Is: A process of human life and development

- focusing on the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and well-being;
- *in relationship* with oneself, other people, other beings, the universe, and ultimate reality however understood (e.g., in animistic, atheistic, nontheistic, polytheistic, theistic, or other ways);
- orienting around centrally significant priorities; and
- engaging a sense of transcendence (experienced as deeply profound, sacred, or transpersonal). (p. 75)

A major difficulty, however, with this definition is that the last phrase excludes clients who do not experience or believe in the phenomenon of transcendence. In regard to the concept of

transcendence, the authors go on to state: “The spiritual journey toward wholeness, or expansion of consciousness to union with the divine or ultimate reality that enfolds all, is a movement of transcendence, going upward and beyond the limits of the ordinary body ego” (p. 88). This is obviously part of the authors’ belief system regarding what is unknowable, but it is framed in an objective way. Social workers should not assume that the phenomenon of transcendence exists, and they ought to view this concept as a point of view held by many, but not all clients.

In summary, there are difficulties with the definitions of spirituality in the social work literature that create a barrier to teaching about the intersection of spirituality and social work practice. First and foremost, the definitions include concepts such as universal connection, God, the Ultimate, and transcendence, as if they were objective reality rather than subjective perspectives regarding the unknown. Certain spiritual belief systems therefore become the definition of spirituality, rather than different spiritual points of view. This may give one the impression that the authors are imposing their own ways of perceiving existence on social work practice, and thus not making room for individual client differences. Social work authors have called for the adoption of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework for social work assessment and practice to replace the bio-psycho-social model that has been a core concept of the social work profession (Canda, 2008; Cornett, 1992; Derezotes, 2006a, 2006b; Rice, 2002; Rothman, 2009; Saad, Hatta, & Mohamad, 2010). However, whereas every client’s issues can be assessed according to social work’s bio-psycho-social perspective, this would not be the case with the bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective as conceived by the vast majority of contemporary authors. If social work students learned to utilize many of the current definitions of what constitutes “spiritual,” they would either not apply to many clients, or even worse, clients would be assessed using culturally derived biased notions regarding the nature of what is unknowable.

Every human being has thoughts and feelings regarding what is unknowable about existence, whether or not these are important components of that person’s conscious life. Existential psychologists such as May (1958) and Yalom (1980) have focused on the universality of each person’s struggle with the inevitability of death and the unknowability of existence. Therefore, the spiritual component of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model for social work practice needs to capture each client’s relationship to what cannot be known in a way that fully honors that person’s belief system and does not exclude any individual’s way of perceiving the nature of existence.

AN INCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

To formulate a bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective that respects the diversity in belief systems of all clients, the following definition of spirituality for social work education and practice is proposed:

Spirituality refers to a human being’s subjective relationship (cognitive, emotional, and intuitive) to what is unknowable about existence, and how a person integrates that relationship into a perspective about the universe, the world, others, self, moral values, and one’s sense of meaning.

Using this definition, understanding each client’s views regarding what is unknowable about existence becomes a part of the assessment process. Every human being has his or her own relationship to what is unknown, and according to this conceptualization, social work students

need to understand this relationship as the client's unique sense of spirituality. Clients who express beliefs in a higher power, universal connection, or transcendence, and/or engage in practices such as prayer and meditation are not viewed as more spiritual than those who do not. Everyone's relationship to what is unknown is equally valid and equally important for assessment and intervention. As pointed out by Miller and Thoresen (2003):

Spirituality is not dichotomous: It is not an attribute that is either present or absent in an individual. Similarly, attempts to define spirituality as a single linear dimension (e.g., something that one has more or less of) are greatly oversimplified and often misleading. (p. 28)

Adding the concept of spirituality to a bio-psycho-social framework according to this definition results in the inclusion of a new perspective not already present in the historical social work model: how clients conceptualize and incorporate into their ways of being what is unknowable about existence. The purpose of this spiritual assessment is to determine if and how clients' presenting problems are affected by their points of view regarding what is unknowable, as there is a reciprocal relationship between such perspectives and the clients' biological, psychological, and social issues. Social work students need to understand this reciprocal relationship, and to assess how to include working with their clients' sense of spirituality if it has a significant bearing on the presenting problem or other difficulties in their lives.

Although this inclusive definition of spirituality is based on the assumption that the nature of existence is unknowable, social work students need to learn to acknowledge and respect the spiritual belief systems of clients who believe that the nature of existence is indeed known. Many individuals, particularly through affiliation with organized religion, may express certainty regarding their spiritual belief systems. In line with social work's value of respecting diversity, it is important that students learn to honor and to gain an understanding of these clients' way of conceptualizing the universe. Hodge (2002, 2011) has expressed concern that the profession of social work has discriminated against clients with conservative religious beliefs. In line with the inclusive definition of spirituality, students need to explore any negative countertransference reactions toward clients who express certainty about their perspective of existence either through their religion or their own personal points of view.

If clients express conflict between their spiritual or religious worldview and their emotional and physical needs, social work students should learn to reflect this dissonance back to them sensitively, without attempting to modify the clients' belief system. This would also pertain to clients who are experiencing conflict between their own unique sense of spirituality and their religious affiliation. Cornett (1998), in his book *The Soul of Psychotherapy*, states the following:

One of the most helpful things that therapy can do with regard to spirituality is not to change the client's view but to amplify it or bring it into sharper focus so that the client may scrutinize it more carefully and decide whether it truly fits the individual circumstances of life. (p. 38)

TEACHING AN INCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM: THE USE OF CASE EXAMPLES

Case examples can be used in the classroom as a valuable tool to demonstrate the importance of assessing the clients' relationship to what is unknowable. A particularly productive way to do this

is to introduce a single vignette regarding a client, and then to present two different spiritual points of view that this client could possibly have. Classroom discussion can then take place regarding how each of the two viewpoints regarding the unknown could profoundly change the nature of the interventions used in each case. The following are two demonstrations of this method of using case examples in the classroom.

Case Study: Todd

Todd is a 53-year-old homeless man who has been heroin and cocaine dependent for over 10 years. He has previously served two lengthy prison sentences for drug-related felony convictions. As it was late December and very cold, he decided to enter an inpatient detox facility in order to get off the streets. At the detox, he was referred to a 28-day inpatient substance abuse rehab program. He agreed to accept the referral in order to stay indoors during the cold weather and receive some nourishing meals. He is now at the rehab facility. He has no intention of remaining abstinent from substance use after he completes the rehab program, but would like to be referred to some type of housing program.

Todd was raised by his mother, who like his uncles and aunts, was religious and very involved with her church. She died of cancer when he was 10 years old. None of his mother's many relatives volunteered to take care of Todd after her death, and he ended up in a series of foster and group homes.

Spiritual scenario 1. On exploration of Todd's views regarding the unknown by the social worker at the rehab program, Todd expresses that he never liked going to church with his mother and other family members, and has always found most religious people to be self-righteous and hypocritical. The fact that his churchgoing relatives would not care for him after his mother's death and allowed him to be placed in foster care enhanced his negative feelings toward people who claim to be religious. However, he remembers with admiration his mother's deep faith in God, and fondly recalls her discussing Bible stories with him. Although his current life revolves around obtaining his next high and surviving day to day, he harbors a feeling that there is a loving God from whom he has completely strayed, and a vague hope that one day he will be able to connect with this higher power.

Spiritual scenario 2. On exploration of Todd's views regarding the unknown by the social worker at the rehab program, Todd states that he learned very early in life that God is vengeful and cruel. Watching his mother suffer through a painful illness, having lived through difficult circumstances in foster care, and having endured his subsequent life on the street and in prison, have taught him that God is to be feared, and certainly not to be counted on for any help. In his childhood and adolescence he often prayed, but his life only became worse. He wonders why God would be so merciless toward his mother and toward him as an innocent child. Sometimes he wonders if God hates him.

Discussion of Todd. Students can see the differences between these two scenarios in Todd's sense of what is unknowable, and the significant effects each scenario might have on the interventions to use when working with Todd. In Scenario 1, the worker may be able to draw on Todd's wish to connect with a loving God and to engage in discussions with him about what this higher

power would like Todd to do at this time. This is not the case in Scenario 2, in which Todd's spiritual sense is that God is a negative force. Instructors can ask students how a social worker in the second scenario might engage Todd in a dialogue about his spiritual views, remaining completely open to his perception that God is cruel. This would include initiating a sensitive exploration of Todd's feeling that God hates him. Students can discuss how it may be possible to have Todd consider whether there is anything he can do that would give him a sense of meaning in a universe in which he cannot count on God for any help. Although Todd's sense of spirituality in Scenario 1 may make a referral to a 12-step program easier and may enhance his chances of engaging in a recovery process, students need to grasp that they should also respect Todd's views if they are those described in Scenario 2, and try to develop a service plan for him that reflects his views of the unknown.

Both scenarios allow for classroom discussion regarding the importance of assessing the reciprocal relationship between one's sense of spirituality and one's bio-psycho-social issues. In this regard, this case can be used as a teaching opportunity to explore how one's early life experiences can profoundly affect one's view of what is unknowable. In the first scenario, Todd's view of a higher power was deeply affected by his connection to his mother, who had strong faith in God. In the second scenario, Todd's spiritual sense was greatly influenced by the loss of his mother, abandonment by his relatives, and his subsequent lack of a stable environment. This discussion can serve as an important bridge between students learning to assess a client's spirituality and social work practice theories.

Using this case, the instructor can set up role-plays in which students can explore Todd's views of the unknown in each scenario. Furthermore, students can create other possible spiritual perspectives that Todd might possess, and role-play or discuss how they could work with him within those different belief systems. Using this inclusive definition of spirituality, it is of paramount importance that students learn to respect as equally valid the different views of what is unknowable in each spiritual scenario.

Case Study: Anna

Anna is a 34-year-old woman who has been referred to a social worker at the district attorney's office. She has been married to Aaron for 15 years and has had five children with him, ages 2 through 14. The family belongs to a conservative religious community. Aaron owns a jewelry business and supports the family well. Anna did not complete high school and has never worked. A week ago, a neighbor called the police after he heard Aaron yelling at Anna in their apartment, the sound of furniture breaking, and Anna screaming for help. When the police arrived, Anna was on the floor crying, and had a large bruise on her face. Aaron was arrested, but released the next day. Over the course of their marriage, Aaron has become increasingly verbally abusive toward Anna. Recently, this has escalated into several episodes of physical violence. This latest episode occurred when Aaron could not find a clean shirt in the apartment to wear to work the following day. Anna has become increasingly depressed as a result of her difficult relationship with her husband. At the current time, Anna is insisting that she wants to drop the charges against her husband. She states that when he was yelling at her, she turned to leave the room and accidentally fell over a chair, bruising her face. Anna spends a considerable period of time with the social worker discussing how emotionally abusive Aaron has been to her, but she will not admit that he has ever hit her.

Spiritual scenario 1. When the social worker asks Anna about her spiritual beliefs, she states that she and her husband are very religious. Anna tells the worker that according to her religion, it is a sin for a woman to disobey her husband, and that she believes she will be punished by God if she ever leaves him. She believes that if it is God's will that she suffer in an abusive marriage, then she will have to endure it. She will then be rewarded in the afterlife.

Spiritual scenario 2. When the social worker asks Anna about her spiritual beliefs, Anna states that she really no longer wants to be a member of Aaron's conservative religious sect. As her childhood and adolescence were rather chaotic, she at first embraced the structure and sense of community of Aaron's religious lifestyle. Now, although she goes through the motions of following the many rituals required by this community, she yearns to return to the less restrictive religious practices of her childhood. This is something that she is not able to discuss with anyone in her current religious social circle. Anna states that she no longer wishes to be with Aaron, but that there is no way that she can financially support their five children on her own. Aaron provides well for the children, and although he is often strict with them and scolds them frequently, he never hits them. Furthermore, Anna counts on the social support of her community. She firmly believes that God has given her the responsibility of raising her children well, and her most important goal in life is to make sure that they have a good life.

Discussion of Anna. In reviewing the first scenario, the class can discuss ways in which the risk to Anna's physical safety and the well-being of her children may be increased by her belief that God requires her to endure being abused by her husband. The classroom instructor can emphasize the benefits of supporting Anna's views regarding the sanctity of marriage, while at the same time probing whether in her spiritual system she believes that God condones violence. Perhaps a distinction can be made between the client's belief in being loyal to one's husband and being the recipient of physical abuse. Instructors can emphasize that it would be essential to maintain a respectful stance toward many of Anna's beliefs regarding what is unknowable, but it would also be important to try to counter the idea that it is acceptable to endure violence and have her children witness it. The social worker can initiate a meaningful discussion with Anna regarding how her marriage would be affected by her pressing charges against Aaron, without necessarily encouraging her to leave him.

Social work students can see how it would be easier in the second scenario than in the first to initiate a productive discussion regarding what is best for the physical and emotional well-being of Anna and her children. Financial issues such as alimony and child support can be explored, as well as her possible fears regarding losing the social support of her religious community. Based on Anna's belief that God wants her to ensure that her children have a good life, the social worker can discuss with her whether the children's lives would, in fact, be better without frequent exposure to emotional and physical abuse in their home. The social worker can explore with Anna whether pressing charges against Aaron may actually be beneficial to herself and her children.

In this case, particularly in the first scenario, students can discuss the issue of how a social worker should handle a situation in which conflicts are present between a client's spiritual belief system and social work values. Anna's views regarding how God wants her to subjugate herself to her husband and even endure physical violence from him are clearly in conflict with the profession's value of social justice (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Furthermore,

allowing her children to witness violence in the home would most likely be in conflict with child welfare standards and would necessitate an investigation by child protective services. Without minimizing the seriousness of these ethical concerns, students need to gain an understanding of the importance of working within Anna's spiritual belief system in the early engagement process and the need to continue exploring her thoughts and feelings regarding what is unknowable in subsequent sessions.

TEACHING STUDENTS TO ELICIT CLIENTS' PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THE UNKNOWN

Social work students are not usually taught how to elicit the spiritual sense of their clients in ways that can be applied to all clients and are fully consonant with social work values. In the previous case examples, the clients' views regarding what is unknowable would probably not have come to light if the social worker had not specifically elicited them. Valuable information, highly relevant to the course of the work with Todd and Anna, would have been missed. The following are three recommendations for enhancing students' practice skills in this regard.

1. Eliciting Clients' Spiritual Perspectives During an Intake

In the classroom, students can be introduced to brief spirituality assessment instruments that are currently available for use during intakes (Canda & Furman, 2010; Hodge, 2006; Moore, 2003). The difficulty with these assessment tools is that they tend to elicit only beliefs regarding the unknown that conform to conventional views of spirituality, and using them will result in missing many clients' perspectives of what is unknowable. Until more inclusive assessment instruments are developed, students can learn to ask such questions as "Do you believe in some form of god or higher power, or do you have another way of understanding the universe?," "What are your views regarding why people are on Earth?," and "What do you believe happens to human beings after they die?" Many responses will stimulate further questions and discussion that social work students should learn to pursue in order to fully understand their clients' views of the unknowable.

As a classroom exercise, students can collaborate to create a list of such intake questions, and then practice interviewing each other with them privately in pairs, answering them in an honest way. Classroom discussion can then focus on what the experience was like, both to ask and answer such questions.

2. Eliciting Clients' Spiritual Perspectives Based on the Content of the Session

It is very important for social work students to become attuned to their clients' spiritual perspectives in both the manifest and latent content of a session, as this is often overlooked in social work practice. A case vignette like the following can be used in the classroom to demonstrate this.

Jose, a 41-year-old male with a history of depression, is seeing a social worker in a mental health clinic. He has lived with his wife, Olivia, for 4 years. Jose has tried to develop a career as a sculptor, while Olivia has worked full-time to support them. Since Olivia gave birth to their first child, Mario,

he has assumed the primary responsibility of raising him while Olivia has continued working. When Mario was five months old, Jose told the social worker that even though he deeply loved his son, he felt despair regarding not having had any time to work on his sculpture since his child's birth. As an aside, he quietly added: "but I guess this was meant to be." The social worker immediately asked Jose about this phrase. This led to a meaningful discussion about how some higher power or force probably wanted him to have a son, and how this would help him grow more as a human being.

Students can see that if the social worker had not focused on the phrase, "but I guess it was meant to be," an important spiritual perspective of the client, highly relevant to his feelings concerning his life situation, might have been lost. In this vein, clients may utter short phrases such as "God willing" or "if fate allows," or make other allusions to a higher power or the nature of the universe, and social work students should learn that exploring such statements can enrich the social work process. In order for students to practice this skill in the classroom, instructors can role-play different clients making underlying references to spiritual beliefs, with students volunteering to role-play social workers clarifying these clients' views of the unknown.

3. Accepting Clients' Reported Mystical and Psychic Experiences as Valid

It is important for social work students to learn to accept mystical and psychic experiences reported by clients as valid for them, without quickly attempting to interpret such phenomena according to a psychological perspective. Instructors, however, need to emphasize to students that they need to exercise caution in this regard when working with clients with psychotic disorders when interventions to enhance reality testing may be the therapeutic priority. Generally, however, there is a great deal to be gained by accepting the client's point of view regarding the unknowable represented in the reporting of such experiences and by fully exploring the meaning of them. A case scenario like the following can be used in the classroom to demonstrate this.

Kadija is a 48-year-old woman whose long-term partner, Natalia, died of cancer 14 months ago. She has been seeing a social worker for bereavement counseling. Kadija has been avoiding her friends since the death of Natalia, sitting on her couch every day watching a great deal of television. After several months, she told the social worker that she had a dream in which she was in a hospital room where Natalia lay dying. The latter turned toward Kadija and said in a loving way: "Kadija, it's time you get off the couch." Kadija cried after telling the social worker the dream, and she discussed how moved she was by the spirit of Natalia giving her this caring advice. She and the social worker discussed how she might listen to Natalia and begin to socialize more, have fun, and even try to meet another woman for a relationship.

Class discussion can focus on how the social worker could have attempted to reframe Kadija's dream as her own wish to "get off the couch" projected onto Natalia. However, this probably would have added little therapeutic benefit, and may even have reduced the power of the experience for Kadija. Furthermore, bringing this dream into the psychological realm would not have fully respected one of Kadija's beliefs regarding what is unknowable, that the spirits of the deceased may exist. As some students may have skeptical reactions regarding reinforcing the

validity of mystical beliefs, it would be helpful for instructors to engage students in a meaningful discussion regarding these types of interventions.

CONCLUSION

A core value of the social work profession is respecting the inherent dignity and worth of each person. In this regard, the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008) specifically states: "Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity." Current conceptualizations of spirituality used in the social work field tend to place greater value on certain ways of viewing what is unknowable over others and are thus not fully consonant with this core value of the profession. In this article, an inclusive definition of spirituality has been proposed for use in social work education, one in which all ways of conceptualizing what is unknowable are considered equally valuable and true. Case examples and other class exercises have been suggested as a helpful method of teaching the importance of understanding each client's relationship to what is unknowable. By using this inclusive definition of spirituality, it is hoped that both educators and students will become far more comfortable with the utilization of a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework in social work practice.

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