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The Relationship Between Spirituality and Social Justice Advocacy: Attitudes of Social Work Students

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Given the importance of social justice advocacy within the profession and the reemergence of spirituality as an important element of social work practice, empirical research into the relationship between spirituality and social justice is needed. The purpose of the present effort is to report on a research project investigating the relationship between one form of spirituality, connectedness with humanity, and tendencies toward social justice advocacy in a group of social work students. Results of the research suggest positive relationships between this form of spirituality and commitment to social justice advocacy and willingness to take individual action to combat injustice.

KEYWORDS spirituality, connectedness, social justice, social work education

Interest in and the investigation of the roles spirituality plays in the lives of social workers, their clients, and the profession itself has increased significantly over the last several decades. After an extended period in which the profession fell in line behind psychology and psychiatry in moving away from consideration of the spiritual and religious in clients' lives and

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professional service (Svare, Jay, Bruce, & Owens-Kane, 2003), spirituality is increasingly becoming a central focus in social work practice, research, and education (Canda, 2005; Canda & Furman, 1999; Derozotes, 2006; Hodge & Bushfield, 2006). To a degree, this increased focus represents a return to the spiritual/religious foundations of the profession.

The profession also appears to be going through a similar refocusing on another foundational precept of the profession, social justice. After a prolonged period in which the profession's traditional emphasis on justice and advocacy may have "fallen prey to benign neglect" (Mitchell & Lynch, 2003, p. 14) and our focus on traditional clinical practice dominated social work thought in education, research, and practice, there has been a recent groundswell of support throughout the profession for a strengthening of our commitment to social justice work (McLaughlin, 2009; Ovrelid, 2008; Popple & Leighninger, 2011; Swenson, 1998).

It may be that the concurrent timing of the increasing emphases on these two areas of interest is not coincidental. Over the years, there has been considerable theorizing about the relationship between spirituality and religion and social justice from both religious and nonreligious perspectives. For many in social work and elsewhere, social justice advocacy has been seen as a natural manifestation of spirituality (Lee & Barnett, 2007). Increasing focus on spirituality and social justice advocacy within the profession may each be related to the growing emphasis on the other.

Empirical research investigating the relationship between spirituality and religion and social work is well underway (Sheridan, 2009). Progress has been made in the investigation of a number of aspects of this relationship, including issues related to educational preparation of social work students and training of practitioners in the areas of spirituality and religion (Cascio, 1999; Murdock, 2005; Sheridan, 2004; Sheridan & Amato von-Hemert, 1999), the use of spiritually based interventions in social work practice (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Murdock, 2005; Sheridan 2004), factors that contribute to the use of such intervention strategies (Dane & Moore, 2005; Heyman, Buchanan, Musgrave, & Menz, 2006; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010), and the ethical issues related to their use (Canda, Nakashima, & Furman, 2004; Sheridan, 2010).

Given the growing awareness of the importance of spirituality within the profession and the reemergence of social justice as a core mission of the profession, knowledge regarding the relationship between the two might be seen as an important area of study (Faver, 2004). While empirical investigation of this relationship has begun (Lee & Barrett, 2007), much work is still needed. The purpose of the present study is to report on a research project investigating the relationship between one form of spirituality, connectedness with humanity, and the propensity to participate in social justice advocacy.

SPIRITUALITY AS CONNECTEDNESS IN SOCIAL WORK AND RELATED LITERATURE

The variety of conceptualizations of spirituality in human services literature is quite diverse. Connectedness has been a central theme that runs throughout this literature. The concept of spirituality as connectedness is reflected in reoccurring discussions in which spirituality is seen as involving harmony with and valuing of various elements of an individual's external and internal environment discrete from the conscious self. Such connectivity/spirituality has been seen as involving a sense of union, communion, oneness, intimacy, attraction to, and interrelatedness with the other elements. Lloyd and O'Connor (2007) cite Kang (2003) in describing this element of spirituality as "lovingly and compassionately connect[ing] with the larger matrix of life" (p. 168).

Discussion of spirituality as connectedness in human services literature commonly focuses on relationships between the individual and one or more of the following: (a) a numinous or supernatural "higher" power, (b) other persons in the immediate environment, (c) humanity in general, (d) nature, and (e) an internal deity or divinity that is distinct from the ego and the personality (Carroll, 2001; Cowley, 1993; Derezotes & Evans, 1995; Ellison, 1983; Jung, 1933; Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Pritt, 1998). Canda (2008) described this sense of connectedness and spirituality as involving "overall morally fulfilling relations with oneself, other people, the universe, and the ground of being" (p. 27).

In 1975, the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging described spiritual well-being as the "affirmation of life in relationship with God, self, community, and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness" (NICA, 1975). Lloyd and O'Connor (2007) described spirituality as involving a sense of "harmony within the self and between the self, nature, others and in some cases, and ultimate other" (p. 168). Mansager and colleagues (2002) suggest that all relationships "that demonstrate respect, equality, dignity, responsibility, consequences [and] integrity . . . are indeed expressions of healthy spirituality" (p. 186). Derezotes (2006) was direct: "Human spirituality can be most simply understood as a person's desire for and expression of loving connection with everything" (p. 3). Faver (2004) described this type of connectivity as "relational spirituality" (p. 242).

CONNECTEDNESS WITH HUMANITY AS A SPECIFIC AREA OF CONCERN

One area of focus regarding spiritual connectedness in both religious thought and human services literature involves the relationship between the individual and humanity. Connectedness with and dedication to one's fellow

man is a common theme in all major religious traditions. “Agape” love is a term commonly used in Christian denominations to denote unconditional, universal love between people. Karkkainen (2003), in discussing commonalities between different Christian religious traditions, describes the concept of *koinonia*, a sense of communion, commitment, unanimity, and “brethren bond” as common to various Christian traditions.

The principles of “Great Love” and “Great Compassion” reflect the importance of connectedness and compassion in the Buddhist traditions (Pyles, 2005). Ovreid (2008) describes spiritual growth in the Buddhist tradition as involving movement toward a state in which “the personal self is connected to everything and everyone in the world” (p. 245) and compassion toward other human beings as a central goal for spiritual living, where others are seen as worthy of respect regardless of what they look like or how they appear.

The Confucian concept of *ren*, considered to be a distinguishing characteristic of mankind within that tradition, loosely translates as humanness, warm-heartedness, or benevolence. *Ren* has also been described as translating into the term “co-humanity,” or a sense of oneness between the individual and the rest of humanity. Yang and Lu (2007) describe that in Confucianism, development of the person involves a process in which the individual “gradually relinquishes the private and individuated self (the small self), to embrace a larger collectivity to which one belongs (the large self)” building toward a “love for all mankind” (p. 106).

Discussion of connectedness with humanity in social work and related literature can be seen as reflecting these traditional spiritual principles. However, much of what we experience as spiritual in this way is now dominated by paradigms from psychology, sociology, political science, and other disciplines. Sutherland (2001) reflected that nearly all aspects of life have been “colonized” by the physical and social sciences (p. 283). Study and discussion about such principles, then, requires that we maintain something of what Canda (2008) discusses as a “liminal” quality, or the ability to “stand in the doorway” between two perspectives or paradigms, in this case, one of which is overtly spiritual or religious and one that is not, with the ability to see that both paradigms can, from their respective perspectives, truthfully and with validity explain a single phenomenon. Sutherland (2001) stressed the need for workers to be able to “oscillate” between frameworks while Derezotes (2006) encouraged social workers to develop the ability to synthesize paradigms that have previously been held as competing or even incompatible.

Connectedness with humanity has been discussed in the literature as involving a sense of valuing, dedication to, responsibility toward humankind. In his seminal work on the *Stages of Faith*, Fowler (1981) described the highest level of faith maturity as the individual transcending their own group or class to focus on the “commonwealth of being” (p. 245).

Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leak, and Saunders (1988) described this element of spirituality as involving a sense of love for or identification with the world community or a belief in the inherent goodness and awesome potential of mankind.

Adler and subsequent theorists have written extensively about Adler's concepts of social interest and community feeling. Leak (2006) argues that social interest closely parallels spirituality, describing the concept as involving "a genuine concern with and striving for community and human welfare" (p. 59). Bass, Curlette, Kern, and McWilliams (2002) describe community feeling as the individual's sense of community with all mankind while Mosak and Dreikurs (2000) use the term "union with community" to characterize the concept (p. 43). Mansager et al. (2002) suggest that spirituality conceptualized as striving for connectedness and unity with the rest of humanity is consistent with these Adlerian principles.

The transpersonal movement in social work and related disciplines is built on a central notion of the unity of the individual and that which is around them, including the rest of humanity (Leight, 2001; Strohl, 1998). Generally considered to be the father of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology, Maslow held that we all have innate spiritual needs that involve yearning for transpersonal experiences that can, if allowed, lead to the highest development of the individual in "the fusion of person and world" (Germana, 2007, p. 67). One's movement toward transpersonal existence is seen as involving the loosening or breaking down of those personal boundaries that separate the individual from those around them resulting in the individual becoming "more lovingly aware of our interconnectedness with, and our interdependence on, the whole of creation" including humanity (Sutherland, 2001, p. 389). Piedmont (1999) considered spirituality to involve an emotional bond with all of humanity and the sense that one is part of a larger "human orchestra" (p. 995). In fact, spirituality itself has been characterized as transpersonal in nature (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008).

SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY AND SPIRITUALITY

The Social Work Dictionary defines social justice as an "ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits" (Barker, 1999, p. 451). The Council on Social Work Education's (2008) Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) have identified social justice as a defining value of the profession and emphasize the importance of guiding new social workers as to the importance of social justice and training them in methods of social justice advocacy (Krentzman & Townsend, 2008). As social work educators we are called to teach the values of the social work profession, one of which

includes social justice (CSWE, 2008, EPAS 1.1). This is a process that includes engaging students in the quest to identify obstacles to full humanity and freedom and the development of the ability to act against those obstacles (Ayers, 1998; Brown, 2004).

As educators our goal is to help students develop an awareness of socially oppressive structures and the temperaments and skills to advocate in opposition to them (Brown, 2004; CSWE, 2008; Friere, 1973). Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) describe such advocacy as “organized efforts aimed at influencing public attitudes, policies, and laws to create a more just society guided by the vision of human rights including political, economic, and social rights” (p. 267). As social justice advocates ourselves, we hope to pass on to our students a “vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (Bell, 1997, p. 3). We work toward the development of a student body that will actively and objectively critique oppressive structures of society and adopt of sense of civic duty to become agents of political and social change in response to those forces (Brown, 2004, p. 333).

Awareness of and appreciation for diversity are integral elements of the ability to work against injustice. Not only must advocates be aware of the elements in society that oppress, but we must also be familiar with how such oppression impacts particular groups and the characteristics, strengths, and needs of those groups. Thus, diversity and social justice are inextricably intertwined (Lum, 2011). Cultural competence is key to effective advocacy practice just as advocacy is key to culturally competent practice (Snyder, May, & Peeler, 2008).

As suggested above, the idea that spirituality and social justice are related is not a new one. Social change and social justice advocacy have long been elements of organized religion, including the support of causes such as civil rights, welfare rights, the labor movement, and various peace movements (Faver, 2004; Lee, 2004; Lee & Barrett, 2007; Ovrelid, 2008). In the Americas, social justice work has long been seen as reflective of the spirit of Christianity itself. At their 34th General Congregation in 1995, the Catholic Church declared a social justice agenda as a moral imperative for that religion. Liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1973) argues the natural link between religion and social justice advocacy. For followers of liberation theology, “social action on the part of the poor and repressed” is a necessary outcome of faith (Singletary, 2005, p. 58). From this perspective, spiritual people are ethically bound to be active in transformative social action. These beliefs, of course, are based in part on the idea that Jesus himself stood with and fought for those who were denied and deprived of right and privilege and against those who oppressed (Preston, 1988). Gutierrez (1973) described the role of the faithful as involving efforts to “abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human” (Preston, 1988, p. 52).

Many authors in social work and related professions have written about the natural relationship between spirituality and social justice advocacy. For them too, social justice advocacy is a natural and integral element of spirituality or faith. Powell (2005) argues that fulfillment of our spiritual lives can only be achieved through engagement with others in the remaking of the world, healing separation, and creating structures and institutions that support relationships and love. Ovrelid (2008) has argued that the compassion inherent in spirituality is the foundation of “one’s commitment to challenge social and political issues in society, such as inequality and justice” (p. 254). Similarly, Hickson and Phelps (1997) see the actions of a spiritual person to be driven by altruistic love and a desire for social justice. Bradley, Maschi and Gilmore (2007) suggest that spirituality involves acting “to achieve and sustain individual and collective empowerment, peace, and social justice” (p. 25) and Kaiser (2000) argues that spirituality unites diverse groups of people in “a common effort to improve the human condition” (p. 9). Lerner (2000) wrote about what he termed “emancipatory spirituality”—spirituality that involves the working together of diverse people and groups in a spirit of love and respect toward goals related to social justice and cultural pluralism.

We are in the early stages of the empirical investigation of the relationship between spirituality and workers’ tendencies regarding social justice advocacy. Tisdell (2002) interviewed 16 adult educators who identified themselves as being dedicated to the teaching of social justice values and strategies to investigate the factors that contributed to the educators’ dedication to their work. Within this group, spirituality was a common motivating force in the educators’ commitment to challenge the mechanisms of racism and other forms of oppression and to teach others to do so. For some of the participants, spirituality provided the structure or foundation to turn inner reflection into outward social action, while others reported that their spirituality helped them to maintain their courage to continue their efforts in social justice work in the face of adversity. Lee and Barrett (2007) interviewed 30 practicing social workers and found spirituality to be a common driving force in their pursuit of a social work career, in their sense of duty to help the less fortunate, and in their participating in social justice related activities generally. Some social workers involved in the study described social responsibility and commitment to social justice as central elements of their spirituality. Serow and Dryden (1990) found that for 1,960 students who were surveyed at several colleges and universities in the southeastern United States, those that highly valued spirituality and religion reported higher levels of engagement in community service activities than those that did not. Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996) interviewed 100 adults who were actively working in their communities to improve the lives of those in need and found that 82 of the 100 participants in their study identified either spirituality or religion as an important contributor to their commitment for their work.

Not all research conducted thus far supports the existence of a positive relationship between spirituality or religiosity and social justice activities, however. Studying a university sample of 134 counseling and counseling psychology students, Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) reported finding no difference in reported levels of engagement in social justice activities between those students who identified as Christian and those who identified as non-religious. In a related study, in their analysis of data from the General Social Survey involving 1,704 respondents, Curry, Koch, and Chalfant (2004) reported finding no relationship between degree of religiosity (as indicated by church attendance, frequency of prayer, reported closeness to God, and tithing) and support for government involvement in the maintenance of economic justice.

Given the minimal amount of research conducted investigating the relationship between a person's spirituality and their propensity to engage in social justice advocacy and the uneven results of the research that has been done thus far, continued work is needed to shed more light on the relationship (Faver, 2004; Miller et al., 2009). The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between one form of spirituality, connectedness with humanity, and tendencies toward social justice advocacy. The authors hoped to test four hypotheses; namely that higher levels of reported connectedness with humanity would be positively related to (a) commitment to social justice advocacy, (b) individual action to confront social injustice, (c) participation in collective action to confront social injustice, and (d) knowledge of local ethnic populations.

METHODS

Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from a population of students attending master's level and undergraduate social work classes at a university in the Midwest United States. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university. One hundred and seventy five surveys asking students about their connection to humanity and their tendencies towards social justice advocacy were distributed and 154 (88%) were returned and completed sufficiently to be utilized in the study. The mean age of the participants was 28.8. The sample consisted of 141 (92%) females and 13 (8%) males. Seventy six of the respondents (49%) were BSW students, 78 (51%) were MSW students. The voluntary nature of participation was stressed to all students and care was taken to empower students to choose to not participate, if that was his or her desire. Instructors of classes were not present when surveys were distributed and completed. Table 1 describes the demographics of our sample. Percentages are relative to the response sample of 154 participants.

TABLE 1 Demographics of the Sample

Demographic	Categories	Frequency (N = 154)
Age	20–24	65 (42%)
	25–29	32 (21%)
	30–39	23 (15%)
	40–60	22 (14%)
Ethnicity	African American	35 (23%)
	Caucasian	108 (70%)
	Other	11 (7%)
Religion	Catholic	28 (18%)
	Protestant	89 (58%)
	Other	13 (8%)
	None	24 (16%)

Measurement of Variables

The survey contained questions designed to measure participants' connectedness with humanity and their tendencies towards social justice advocacy. The authors hypothesized that connectedness with humanity would be positively related to (a) commitment to social justice advocacy, (b) individual action in confronting social injustice, (c) participation in collective action to confront social injustice, and (d) knowledge of local ethnic populations.

Connectedness with humanity was measured through the use of a 6-item scale (Prior & Quinn, 2010) that includes items such as "In spite of all, I have a deep, positive belief in humanity," "I feel a deep love for all of humanity," and "While there is much evil in the world, I believe goodness, integrity, and love also abound." The scale utilizes a 6-point Likert format with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Previous testing for internal reliability of the scale has resulted in Cronbach's alphas ranging from .78 to .85. Reliability for the scale with the sample in this study was .71.

Commitment to social justice advocacy was measured through the use of a subscale of the Social Issues Questionnaire developed by Miller et al. (2009), which includes items that assess students' intentions to participate in social justice related activities. The 4-item scale includes statements such as "In the future, I intend to engage in social justice activities," "I have a plan of action for ways I will remain or become involved in social justice activities over the next year," and "I am fully committed to engaging in social justice activities," and utilizes a 10-point Likert format with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*). Miller et al. (2009) report finding internal consistency of the 4-item scale ranging from .92 to .94. Testing for internal reliability of the scale in this study resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Individual action in confronting social injustice was measured through the use of a 5-item Individual Action Scale utilized by Pittman (2007) that included items developed by Nagda, Kim, and Truelove (2004). The scale is made up of items intended to gauge respondents' propensity to "challenge others on racial/ethnic/sexually derogatory comments," "make efforts to educate myself about other groups (e.g., other ethnic groups, gender, or sexual orientations)," and "make efforts to get to know individuals from diverse backgrounds." For the present study, each statement was altered slightly so that they read as first person statements such as "I challenge others on racial/ethnic/sexually derogatory comments" and "I make efforts to get to know individuals from diverse backgrounds." A 4-point Likert response set was used with the five items with responses including always, often, seldom, and never. Pittman (2007) reports a Cronbach's alpha of .75 for this 5-item scale. Testing for internal reliability of the scale here resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .63.

Participation in collective action to confront social injustice was measured through the use of three items from Pittman's (2007) Collective Action Scale. This scale includes four items, also based on the work of Nagda, Kim, and Truelove (2004), which are designed to assess the respondent's patterns of taking social justice action with others. Items on the scale inquire about the degree to which respondents "call, write, or in some way protest when a book, newspaper, television show, or some branch of media perpetuates a bias or prejudice," "get together with others to challenge an unjust practice," "join an organization that takes action toward social justice," and "organize an educational forum to inform others about social injustice." Students were asked to report whether it was true or not true that they had participated in the first three of these activities. The fourth item of Pittman's scale inquiring as to whether or not respondents had organized educational forums was not utilized in the present study because it was not expected that many of our students had yet participated in such an advanced activity. Pittman (2007) reports a Cronbach's alpha of .86 for the 4-item scale. Testing for internal reliability of the 3-item scale used here resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .44.

Finally, knowledge of local ethnic populations was measured through the use of four items from a cultural competence questionnaire for service providers developed by The National Fathers' Network (1996). This comprehensive questionnaire was designed to assess service providers' level of knowledge about the lives of local populations including their strengths, social problems, social service needs, resources, and cultural beliefs. The items borrowed from the survey to assess knowledge of local populations were altered slightly for use here and read:

1. How well are you able to describe the strengths of the groups of Color in your service area?

2. How well are you able to describe the social problems of the groups of Color in your service area?
3. Do you know the prevailing beliefs, customs, norms, and values of the groups of Color in your service area?
4. Do you know the social service needs with communities of Color that go unaddressed by the formal social service systems?

A 4-choice response set was utilized with these four items, with responses including not at all, barely, fairly well, and very well. To the authors' knowledge, these four items have not been used previously as a stand-alone scale and inasmuch no data regarding the reliability of the items as a unit have been reported. Testing for internal reliability of the scale with the sample in the present study yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

RESULTS

Descriptive Findings on Major Variables

Composite scores for each variable were computed and used for analysis. The scores for the connectedness to humanity variable ranged from 21 to 36 (higher scores indicate a greater connectedness) with a mean of 30.76 ($SD = 3.45$). The scores for the scale measuring commitment to social justice advocacy ranged from 13 to 36 (higher scores indicate a greater commitment to advocacy) with a mean of 30.76 ($SD = 3.45$). The scores for the knowledge of local ethnic populations scale ranged from 8 to 16 (with higher scores being indicative of greater knowledge) with a mean of 12.40 ($SD = 1.90$). The scores for the scale measuring individual action in confronting social injustice ranged from 11 to 20 (higher scores being indicative of a more frequent action taken) with a mean of 15.98 ($SD = 2.12$). The scores for the scale measuring participation in collective action ranged from 3 to 6 (higher scores being indicative of taking more action) with a mean of 4.29 ($SD = 1.00$).

Participants' scores for all five variables were compared across demographic categories. Only two significant relationships emerged. First, knowledge of local ethnic populations varied significantly by age, $F(3,138) = 3.05$, $p = .03$. A Tukey LSD post hoc analysis indicated that the knowledge of local ethnic populations for the 20–24 age group ($M = 11.68$, $SD = 1.79$) were significantly lower ($p < .01$) than those aged 40–60 ($M = 12.91$, $SD = 1.57$). Secondly, knowledge of local ethnic populations also varied significantly by ethnicity, $F(2,151) = 18.16$, $p < .01$. The Tukey LSD post hoc analysis indicated that Caucasians' knowledge of local ethnic populations ($M = 11.60$, $SD = 1.77$) was significantly lower than that of African Americans ($M = 13.54$, $SD = 1.58$; $p < .01$) and that of respondents in the "other" ethnic category ($M = 12.91$, $SD = 1.51$; $p = .02$).

TABLE 2 Correlations Between Connectedness with Humanity and Four Social Justice Advocacy Variables

	Commitment to social justice advocacy	Knowledge of local ethnic populations	Individual action in confronting social injustice	Participation in collective action
Connectedness to humanity	$r = .38^*$	$r = .16^*$	$r = .38^*$	$r = -.19^*$

* $p < .05$.

Relationship Between Connectedness with Humanity and Social Justice Advocacy

Next, we examined the idea that higher levels of reported connectedness with humanity would be positively related to the four social justice advocacy variables. Table 2 describes the correlation coefficients for the pairing of connectedness to humanity and the four social justice variables.

Three of the four hypotheses were supported by the findings of positive correlations. Higher levels of connectedness with humanity were found to be associated with higher levels of reported social justice advocacy. Two of these relationships, between connectedness with humanity and (a) commitment to social justice advocacy and (b) individual action taken in confronting social injustice, were of medium strength, while a weak positive relationship was found between connectedness and knowledge of local ethnic populations. Finally, a weak *inverse* relationship existed between connectedness to humanity and participation in collective action.

DISCUSSION

First, it should be noted that, with two exceptions, respondents' demographic characteristics, including ethnicity, religion, gender, and age were not found to be related to their degree of connectedness with humanity or tendencies toward social justice advocacy. The exceptions were that respondents' age and ethnicity were found to be related to respondents' level of knowledge regarding local ethnic populations. Respondents in the 20–24 age range reported lower levels of knowledge about local ethnic groups than those in the 40–60 year old age group, and Caucasian respondents were found to report lower levels of knowledge about local ethnic populations than the other respondents. Previous research investigating relationships between demographic characteristics and social justice advocacy has yielded mixed results. Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) reported finding no association between social justice activities and ethnicity, gender, or religiosity. However, Kiselica and Robinson (2001) found respondent age to be a predictor of social justice values while Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan,

and Landreman (2002), investigating the relationship between gender and social action in a masters-level university population, found females to be more likely to value engagement in social action than males. In a related study involving Korean university students, Lee (1997) found males to be more likely than females to report being involved in social protest activities. Given the uneven results of the research in this area of study thus far, it would appear that continued investigation into the relationships between demographic variables and social justice activities is warranted.

Regarding the relationships between spirituality as connectedness with humanity and the four dependent variables, the results of this research suggest that for this population positive relationships existed between the respondents' reported connectedness with humanity and several aspects of their tendency to participate in social justice advocacy activities. Respondents' connectedness with humanity was moderately associated with reported commitment to social justice advocacy. This might be seen as a significant finding in light of previous research in which commitment to participate in social justice related activities has been found to be associated with actual advocacy activities. Employing the Commitment to Social Justice Advocacy Scale utilized here, Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) found such commitment to be predictive of subsequent engagement in social justice advocacy.

Spirituality as connectedness with humanity was also found to be moderately associated with individual confrontation of social injustice. The tendency toward individual social justice actions came in two main forms in the scale utilized in this study. The first was the tendency to confront and/or refusal to participate in what Snyder, May, and Peeler (2008) described as "micro aggressions" or individual verbalizations and actions that are seen as detrimental to or derogatory toward other groups. Items reflecting this aspect of the variable included "I challenge others on racial, ethnic, and sexually derogatory comments" and "I refuse to participate in jokes that are derogatory to any group." The second form of individual action within the scale was the tendency to educate oneself about and seeking to experience individuals from groups other than one's own. Items reflecting this aspect of the variable included "I make efforts to educate myself about other groups" and "I make efforts to get to know individuals from diverse backgrounds." Both aspects of this variable reflect the respondent's propensity to address social injustice at the micro or personal level. However, the dual focus of the items in the scale (the tendency to reject micro-aggression and the tendency to educate oneself regarding diversity) is likely related to the low reliability of the scale in this study (.63) and suggested the need for closer inspection of the relationships between connectedness with humanity and each of the items in the scale. A correlational analysis revealed significant relationships between connectedness with humanity and each of the five items, indicating positive relationships between connectedness with humanity and both confrontation

of micro-aggression and self-education. Correlations ranged from .226 to .250 and all relationships were significant at the .01 level.

A weak but statistically significant relationship was found between connectedness with humanity and knowledge of local ethnic populations. It may well be that the narrow focus of the scale, being limited to inquiry about knowledge of local ethnic groups and not including items related to other forms of diversity, impacted the strength of the association between the two scales. In addition to the weakness of this association, the nature of this relationship is confounded further by the findings that knowledge of local populations varied by ethnicity and age. Given the weak association between connectedness and levels of knowledge and the apparent relationships between the two demographic variables and reported knowledge, more research is called for regarding the relationship between spirituality as connectedness and knowledge of diverse groups.

A weak inverse relationship was found between connectedness and participation in collective action. As reported above, the alpha for the three item Collective Action Scale used here was quite low ($\alpha = .44$), a finding that makes interpretation of the data difficult. The use of a two-choice, yes or no, response set may well have had a confounding effect on the effort to gather information regarding respondents' tendency to participate in collective action in this study. Given the nature of the generally positive association between organized religion and collective social action as described elsewhere in this paper and the inverse, albeit weak, relationship here, continued investigation into the relationship between connectedness with humanity and other forms of spirituality and collective social advocacy is warranted.

In addition, it should be noted that the strength of the alpha for the Connectedness with Humanity Scale (.71) was lower than had been found in previous research in which the scale was developed and tested (Prior & Quinn, 2010). This, too, may have impacted the findings of this study and suggests the need for future research into the use of the Connectedness with Humanity Scale as a viable measure of that form of spirituality.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

There are a number of important limitations with this study. Low or unacceptable alphas on the Individual Action Scale ($\alpha = .63$) (Pittman, 2007) and the 3-item version of the Collective Action Scale ($\alpha = .44$) (Pittman, 2007) certainly are confounding factors in the interpretation of the data gathered. In addition, the narrow focus of the scale utilized to measure knowledge of local populations limited the breadth of the information collected in that area of concern. The 4 items of the scale inquired about respondents' knowledge of local ethnic populations. Although knowledge regarding local ethnic populations can certainly be seen as an important element of cultural

competence and social justice advocacy, the inclusion of similar items gauging knowledge related to populations whose needs might be related to other demographic variables such as sexual orientation, age, ability, gender, and income would have provided important information about the sample being studied and allowed for a more thorough inspection of the relationship between this form of spirituality and diversity awareness as an element of social justice advocacy.

In addition, in studies involving variables such as spirituality, connectedness, and tendencies regarding one's actions toward social change, the possibility of response bias related to social desirability and attempted impression management must be acknowledged. Gray (2006) warned against the possibility of response bias due to social desirability or impression management in the development and use of measures of spirituality. Holmes (2009) also warned about a similar threat to validity in the use of racial attitude scales that include items like those being utilized in the individual action scale here, arguing that the possibility of "fake good" responses in such scales must be considered. Although efforts were made to assure the anonymity of participants in this study, social desirability response bias must be considered as a possible threat to the validity of the findings described here. The inclusion of a scale designed to measure social desirability (e.g., Paulus's [1998] Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding), in future research investigating relationships between variables such as those being assessed here may serve to decrease the threat from this type of threat to validity in future studies.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite recent progress in this area of study, continued work is necessary in the investigation into the roles spirituality plays in various aspects of social work education and practice, including its relationship with social justice advocacy (Faver, 2004). Given the profession's commitment to combat social injustice in its various forms and our requirement as educators to prepare the next generation of social workers to carry out that mission, it is incumbent upon us to develop knowledge regarding the factors, including personal factors such as spirituality and religiosity, that contribute to our students' propensity to advocate against social injustice (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Parrott, 2009). The results of this study suggesting a positive relationship between spirituality and social justice advocacy parallel previous research findings that for some social workers, spirituality is related to their social justice advocacy activities. However, given the narrow focus and the limitations of the study as described above, future research into the relationships between connectedness and other forms of spirituality and various social justice advocacy activities is needed.

Investigation into spirituality itself begins with the complex tasks of defining and operationalizing whatever forms of spirituality one hopes to study. Considerable work remains in the establishment of measures of spirituality in its many forms. In the present study, the authors utilized a recently developed measure, the Connectedness with Humanity Scale, to assess that form of spirituality. The relatively low level of internal consistency of the scale (.71) with the population being studied here suggests the need for continued testing and/or refinement of that scale. In addition, questionable (.63) and unacceptable (.44) alpha levels on several of the social justice measures call for further deliberation regarding the use of the scales involved. For two of the scales a four choice Likert-type response set was utilized, and on one scale, the collective action scale, a yes or no format was used. The use of a broader response set for each of these three scales may allow for a more detailed investigation of the variables involved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Social work's dedication to social justice and advocacy distinguishes it from other professions (McLaughlin, 2009). A central purpose of social work education is to develop "citizens who will become actively involved in influencing, shaping, and changing" society (Pittman, 2007, p. 247). To that end, our mission is to not only help students learn about injustice and those aspects of society that contribute to it and to prepare them with strategies to combat it, but to also assist them in the identification and strengthening of their own personal characteristics that will allow for the professional development necessary for them to create and sustain social change. The findings here of a positive association between one form of spirituality and social justice advocacy in a student population suggest the need for a focus within social work education on spirituality as a means of more effectively developing workers capable of sustaining their advocacy efforts. Calls for the strengthening of content and training related to social justice and spirituality and religion in social work education have been growing (McLaughlin, 2009; Sheridan, 2009). If the current trends of increasing focus on those foundational elements of the profession are to continue, as educators we will need to continue to work toward the strengthening of our own service delivery in those areas of concern to the students we serve.

CONCLUSION

Although the relationship between spirituality and social justice advocacy has been theorized and written about extensively over the years, empirical research into the relationship between these two important elements of

social work is in its early stages. Considerable work remains in this area of study, including in the area of how the relationship can impact social work education. The purpose of this effort has been to provide one small stepping stone in the path to greater knowledge in these areas of study.

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