Chapter 15
Spirituality and Practice in Social Work, Youth and Family Studies

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Abstract The academic fields of social work and family studies are two related, yet distinct, disciplines. Family Study practitioners consist of certified family life educators and marriage and family therapists (MFTs), though MFTs require a terminal degree and additional training. The field of social work includes various levels of licensed social workers. Across both fields, spirituality is viewed as a resource that is essential to physical and/or emotional healing and well-being. Social workers include spirituality as an essential component of practice in its person-in-environment guiding framework. Of note, family studies scholars put forth a theory of the sacred acknowledge not only the importance of spirituality, but also cautioning its ability to help or harm people. Moving forward, both fields can be advanced through the production of a theory that aid practitioners with prevention, assessment, and intervention tools that can improve the functioning of individuals and families.

Defining Spirituality Across the Academic Fields of Social Work and Family Studies

Across both academic/professional fields covered in this chapter, spirituality is defined in many ways. However, across both fields, a commonality is that spirituality is a component of the internal self and it involves processes or outcomes that help individual navigate their social environments. Additionally, both fields rely on person $\leftrightarrow$ contextual relational frameworks to demonstrate how spirituality can advance the wellbeing of the individual. In social work, practitioners use the client's spirituality to aid the search for meaning, connectedness (to the divine or others), and purpose in life, all in hopes of helping the client better navigate the maladaptive aspects of their social environment. In family studies, specifically youth development, youth development professionals emphasize spirituality's ability to imbue positive qualities (e.g., transcendence, generosity) that help youth thrive.

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Thus, practitioners have emphasized the development or nurturance of youths' spirituality, in hopes of youth developing on a pathway where they thrive or make meaningful contributions back to their environment that they are embedded.

Definitions of Spirituality in Social Work

Domains within the field of social work most likely to focus on conceptions of spirituality in practice settings can be generalist social work practitioners, working from the person in environment perspective (i.e., a guide principle to practice that emphasizes the importance of understanding individual behavior in respect the context in which the person is embedded), or independently licensed social works in clinical settings. Generally, the goal is to work with clients by helping them through issues and difficulties they are facing (e.g., depression, eating disorders, marital problems, drug abuse).

A common thread among definitions of spirituality in the field of social work is the concept of meaning, purpose, and connectedness. Specifically, several definitions suggest that spirituality is intricately linked to establishing meaning in life. Additionally, such definitions imply that spirituality is distinctly an internal developmental process that helps individuals navigate aspects of their environment that produce maladaptive outcomes.

Barker (2008) conceptualizes spirituality as the process of making meaning so as to help determine purpose in life. Canda (1999) defines spirituality, broadly, as a way of life. Further, he asserts that spirituality helps with the meaning making process, developing a moral compass, establishing connections to others, and binding humanity together. Cascio's (1998) conception of spirituality is a combination of the previous two conceptions, but adds that it also helps people with developing a narrative for understanding the universe around them. Holloway and Moss (2010) use an action oriented conception by positing that spirituality is the process by which people make meaning out of their transcendent experiences. Jackson and colleagues (2010) also put forth an action based conception, though they assert that spirituality serves as an expression that "frees" the individual. Of note, their work was with youth in foster care, thus, a spiritual conception that helps individuals mentally or emotionally escape, or cope with, difficult circumstances is warranted. Hodge and Horvath (2011) define spirituality as the need or desire to align or affiliate one's self with something, with, McKenan (2007) theorizing that spirituality is the search for insight or wisdom that helps with meaning making through the connection to a larger life purpose.

In the person in environment model, practitioners use spirituality as an internal tool of the clients that can be tapped to help refocus the client, providing them with coping abilities to adaptively manage the environmental stressors that produce mental health struggles and/or maladaptive behaviors (Walsh 2008). There are various ways this model can be used in therapy. For one, practitioners can guild clients in using their spirituality make meaning out of the experiences that

are overwhelming their coping abilities. Another approach includes practitioners helping clients construct, or remember, perspectives whereby their spirituality gives them a larger purpose in life, which transcends the environmental pressures that led to mental health struggles. In other cases, clients may feel disconnected from their environment, which can ignite mental health problems. In these instances, practitioners can tap into the client's spirituality in ways that encourages perspectives (e.g., realizing that they are connected to a community of believers) and action (e.g., encouraging the client to physically connect to a [religious] community that shares their spiritual beliefs) that establishes a "sense of place" for the client.

Though the main organization for the field of social work, NASW (National Association of Social Workers), appears to not have a unifying consensus definition for spirituality, from the person in environment perspective, the commonality is that many social workers use spirituality as a client resource. Specifically, a resource that can be tapped into during therapeutic intervention that helps the client clients more effectively navigate and adapt to difficult aspects of their environment.

Definitions of Spirituality in Family Studies

Though it is the case that both fields, social work and family studies, covered in this chapter work with individuals and families, they have their distinctions as well. The field of family studies, in America, is multidisciplinary and covers many aspects of family life. One of, if not *the*, the main organization for this academic and professional discipline is the National Council on Family Relations. The theme or motto of the organization is "catalyzing, research, theory, and practice." The practitioner arm of the organization is its CFLEs (certified family life educators). The scope of CFLE work spans across ten content areas of family life: families and individuals in societal contexts, internal dynamics of families, human growth and lifespan development across the lifespan, human sexuality, interpersonal relationships, family resource management, parent education and guidance, family law and public policy, professional ethics and practice, family life education and methodology. Though spirituality has its place in most, if not all, of those content areas, it would be outside the scope of this author's expertise to explore its practical role in all of the content areas. Thus, this chapter will focus on spirituality, within the context of youth development and contexts where that component of development can be developed and nurtured (i.e., the family).

One of the fastest growing areas of research in the field of youth development has been the role of spirituality in youths' positive development. Since the call for more work on the spiritual development of youth (Benson et al. 2003), several studies have been conducted examining its role in youths' development, particularly their positive development. What those works also identified, is that the subjective nature of spirituality means it is conceptualized in a myriad of ways, even among researchers.

Pittman et al. (2008) define spirituality as a core developmental process that serves as an engine for cognitive awareness or awakening, making social connections or sense of belonging, and shaping one's way of life. In their research evaluating the effectiveness of youth programs, Catalano et al. (2002) used a dictionary definition of spirituality, which defined the concept as "relating to, consisting of, or having the nature of spirit; concerned with or affecting the soul; of, from, or relating to God; of or belonging to a church or religion" (Berube et al. 1995). Later, they added that spirituality also concerns "beliefs in a higher power, internal reflection or meditation . . . sense of spiritual identity, meaning, or practice" (p. 20). Desrosier and Miller's (2007) definition mirror the work of Hay (2000), in that they both argue that spirituality is inherently relational, whether it be to other people or some greater divine source. More specifically, Desrosier and Miller conceptualized spirituality as "a sense of closeness with God, feelings of interconnectedness with the world or an awareness of a transcendent dimension" (p. 1022). Of note, these authors explicitly made a distinction between religiosity and spirituality. King et al. (2013) note the oft-cited definition of spirituality as the "search for the sacred" (p. 188), but also acknowledge that spirituality is conceptualized in various other ways, such as: pursing meaning, purpose, transcendence, connections, belonging, and passions. In line with King's assertion, Good et al. (2011), defined spirituality as the search for the sacred, but also pointed out that such processes usually take place within religious contexts. Thus, they combined religiosity and spirituality as a single construct, while recognizing the many domains in which people can connect with the sacred (e.g., institutional vs. personal). Damon (2008), though not asserting a particular direction, says that spirituality is linked to youths' search for meaning and purpose in life. A wealth of studies on adolescent spirituality conceptualize the term as being related to transcendence, or becoming aware of or connected to something larger than oneself (Benson et al. 2003, 2010; Kim and Esquivel 2011; Koenig et al. 2001; Lerner et al. 2008). But many of these studies use definitions that were constructed by adults. This begs the question of how do youth define the concept.

In a mixed method study, using data from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, James et al. (2012) found that youth also define spirituality in many ways. Their qualitative analysis revealed that youth conceptualize being spiritual in ten, somewhat mutually exclusive, ways: possessing keen consciousness, self-confidence, high religious involvement, being connected, belief in a higher power or force, having purpose, exuding radiance, being virtuous, unarticulated spirituality, the same as being religious.

Regardless of whether the definitions are constructed by adults, or youth themselves, in the field of family studies the concept is overwhelmingly linked to processes of the inner self (e.g., consciousness, feelings, identity). Additionally, the various conceptualizations imply that spirituality is a positive developmental process. In the youth development literature, there appears to be no definitions suggesting that spirituality is linked to negative developmental outcomes for youth. Thus, it makes sense that much of the work investigating youths' spirituality frames it within the context of positive development.

Reviewing How Spirituality Has Informed the Practice of Social Workers and Family Practitioners

Field of Social Work

In the field of social work, in American, spirituality is an essential component of practice in its person-in-environment guiding framework. Usually couched in a Jungian (1959) perspective, social workers have historically believed in the therapeutic benefits of spirituality. More specifically, social workers have taken notice in the important therapeutic role that spirituality has in wellness and health (Ben Asher 2001; Koenig et al. 2012; Sermabeikian 1994; Zapf 2005). Though many practitioners include spiritual based interventions into their practice, the field lacked a standardized and evidenced based way to assess spirituality, much less select interventions (Hodge 2006; Sheridan 2004). In fact, the field struggled with the overwhelming use, and acceptance, of such practices without much formal training (Rothman 2009). Regardless, spiritual interventions continue to be used in social work practice. Here, I review some of those interventions, discuss "what works" and provide some general advice about how to incorporate them into practice.

One international study found that qualified British and American social workers viewed several spiritual interventions as appropriate when working with clients in their practice (Gilligan and Furness 2006). Though there were differences in whether the two national samples had actually used such interventions, those interventions that were overwhelmingly considered appropriate across the two samplings included: gathering information about the client's spiritual lives, and helping develop rituals as an intervention, with recommending spiritual based literature and using spiritual language and concepts in practice receiving moderate support. Barker's (2008) research suggests that spiritual interventions such as encouraging spiritual practices (i.e., prayer, reading spiritual texts), or connecting with faith communities are other interventions social workers can use to help their clients with the problems they face.

In her review of the literature, Sheridan (2009) found that social workers use a variety of spiritual based interventions in their practice, though decisions guiding how and what interventions to use are based on the practitioner's own spirituality. Further, practitioners receive little to no training on such interventions and the field lacks a comprehensive ethical guideline for use of such interventions. Hodge (2011) highlights the gap between practitioner's use of spirituality based interventions without having much training on such interventions nor evidence based support for using it.

In the absence of unified training on spiritual aspects of life in social work training, Hodge (2011) suggests that, at the very least, practitioners use spirituality interventions that are evidence based. He defines evidence-based spiritual practice as "*the integration of the best available research on spirituality*, *with clinical expertise using spiritual interventions*, *in a context that respects clients*' *spiritual values*, *cultures*, *and preferences*." But with that said, it does not mean that social

workers have ceased using such interventions with clients. One plausible reason clinicians continue to use spiritual intervention that are not evidence based can be attributed to the power of belief and how those beliefs can produce beneficial mental health outcomes that are difficult to capture in empirical research (Meraviglia 1999; Palmer et al. 2004). This begs the question of are there any therapeutic spiritual interventions that can be classified as evidence based and effective.

In separate systematic reviews, Hodge (2006, 2007) investigated the effectiveness of two spiritual based interventions: intercessory prayer and spirituality modified cognitive therapy. His findings suggest that intercessory prayer cannot be classified as an empirically based spiritual intervention to mitigate any psychological problem, though evidence does exist for its benefit in limited practitioner-client settings (e.g., patients in hospitals; Hodge 2007). Conversely, Hodge (2006) found spiritually modified cognitive therapy to be an effective intervention, but particularly with patients suffering from depression.

Even though the research shows limited effectiveness of spiritual interventions, this has not prevented social workers from using them. In light of this, Cascio (1998) advice remains to be applicable, which suggests that practitioners first clarify any potential differences in understandings of spirituality between the client and practitioner to avoid any negative consequences (i.e., differential spiritual beliefs between the practitioner and client that erode away the trust in that relationship, which prohibits effective therapeutic intervention), if such differences exist. Also, Cascio (1998) asserts that practitioners should not impose their own personal beliefs on the clients, rather use their competencies to understand the client's spirituality beliefs and develop strategies that harness spirituality as a resource in therapy. Of course, using sound spiritual assessments aids in this process (see Hodge 2013a), while also relying on Hodge's (2011) advice to use evidence based research to help determine the best spiritual interventions when working with clients.

Field of Family Studies

As a CFLE, my work regarding spirituality has focused primarily on investigating linkages between youths' perceived spirituality and their positive development. The practice component of that is that such research allows me to provide direct (i.e., workshops or direct consultation), or indirect (i.e., publishing in professional outlets) information to individuals, families, or institutions (e.g., schools, community centers) about how to incorporate spiritual development into programming.

Theoretical and Empirical Support for Practice

The cutting edge of research in youth development is relational developmental systems theory (RDST; Overton 2011), out of which derived the positive youth development (PYD) framework (Lerner et al. 2009), a strengths based approach

to youth development that is more balanced than the deficit approach (i.e., storm and stress; Hall 1904) that historically dominated the discipline of adolescent development. The advantage of this approach to youth development, and the role of spirituality in it, is that it has both theoretical and practical application (Lerner et al. 2009). I briefly describe each theory (PYD & RDST), followed by how to put spirituality research into practice.

Relational developmental systems theory emphasizes that the course of human development is regulated by the mutual interactions between individuals and the multi-level contexts (e.g., home, school, community) that they are embedded in, what is known as person↔environment context (Overton 2011). A promise of this theory is its focus on the plasticity of development, meaning individuals are not on a fixed ontogenetic path; rather, development is *plastic* in that multiple developmental outcomes are possible with the systematic change that can occur based on the vast array of person↔environment interactions (Lerner 1984). When the person↔environment relations are mutually beneficial, they are said to be adaptive developmental regulations (Brandtstädter 2006). The purpose of PYD theory is to advance *adaptive developmental regulations*, which develops or nurtures the strengths of youth; in turn, youth then use those strengths to meaningfully contribute to (and benefit from) institutions in their environment (or thrive) (Lerner et al. 2005).

PYD conceptualizes positive development as internal strengths through its five C model. The five Cs (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring) represents meta indicators that when developed in youth, places them on a pathway toward thriving. Thriving is conceptualized as the sixth C (contribution), which is defined as youth using their strengths to make meaningful contributions to their selves, families, communities, and other institutions in their environment. (For a more comprehensive review of the PYD theory and its empirical validation, see Lerner et al. 2005).

Putting PYD into Practice

Accordingly, to ensure thriving, institutions (e.g., the family) in which the youth are embedded can recognize the actual, or potential, strengths of youth and provide opportunities to develop and nurture those strengths. A comprehensive approach to implementing PYD in youth programming was put forth by Lerner (2007) in *The Good Teen*. He uses empirical-based literature to support his arguments for best practices helping youth thrive. The constructs that "big three" model that helps youth develop and nurture the five C strengths needed to help them thrive. Those three factors are: positive and sustained relationships with adults (e.g., peer-mentor relations; Rhodes and Lowe 2009), increasing life skills (e.g., developing goal setting behaviors; Freund and Baltes 2002), and opportunities for youth to exert leadership roles in meaningful community activities (e.g., serve as a delegate on city council).

Putting Spirituality into Practice

Both James et al. (2012) and Warren and colleagues (2011) provide empirical support regarding the relation between youths' spirituality and their positive development. Specifically, James et al. (2012) study found concurrent positive correlations between youths' perceived spirituality with each of the six Cs of the PYD model (Lerner et al. 2009), with their spirituality scores being linked to their character scores 1 year later. The conclusion was that spirituality is an additional internal asset that is linked to youths thriving behaviors. Thus, the question becomes how do we grow or nurture the spiritualist of youth.

Lerner's (2007) big three model relies heavily on both community and family resources to help grow the five Cs in youth, but do those same factors work similarly for growing youths' spirituality? In a follow-up study, James and colleagues (in press) investigated the mediating role of family assets on the relationship between community assets and youths' self-ratings of spirituality. They found that human resources in a given community were positively related to youths' spirituality and were partially mediated by family religiosity. Thus, both the community and family play a role in growing the spirituality of youth, an internal asset that helps them thrive.

With that in mind, my advice to parents has been to create a home environment that supports the spirituality development and growth of their children. For instance, have open dialogue with their adolescent children about their spirituality. This can help them clarify their notions of spirituality, with research has been shown to also be linked to positive development (James and Fine 2015), specifically allowing them to clarify their notions of spirituality. Also, parents can find mentors for their teen children, but mentors that will intentionally invest in the process of helping youth clarify and internalizing spiritual values. Finally, borrowing from Lerner's (2007) model, parents can seek out opportunities that allow their children to exert leadership roles reflecting their spiritual values. If the youth define spirituality as transcendence or helping others, have her develop a plan where she can serve others, but be sure to have her link that activity back to her notion of spirituality. Such opportunities validate the spiritual notions of the youth, while also encouraging her to make meaningful contributions to the greater society.

Spirituality Based Professional Development in Social Work and Family Studies

Professional Development in Social Work

With its licensure process, the field of social work has a host of professional development requirements (also known as continue education or CE), and opportunities and resources to satisfy those CE requirements. The NASW website has

a *practice & professional development* page (see: http://www.naswdc.org/pdev/default.asp) where social workers can go to search for CE opportunities. Additionally, CE formats include workshops, online webinars, agreements with university social work departments, opportunities at national conferences, etc. Specific to CE opportunities in regarding practice and spirituality, noted social work scholar David Hodge (2013b) created a webinar describing the best practices for using spiritual assessments in practice. The webinar is available to NASW members on their CE platform.

Professional Development in Family Studies

There is an abundance of professional development (also referred to as continuing education or CE) opportunities that exist for CFLEs, which is required to maintain one's certification. The NCFR website has a CFLE certification page (see: https://www.ncfr.org/cfle-certification/cfle-continuing-education) that explains the requirements and opportunities for obtaining CE credit. CE can occur across many formats (e.g., webinars, teaching or taking a class, attending or facilitating a workshop, attend or present at the national conference, etc.), the key is that the CE is related to one of the ten content areas of family life listed above. The organization does not have a professional development format that specifically relates to the incorporation of spirituality into practice; however, a search of the organization's website using the term "spirituality" revealed a host of published papers about the topic, though few were specific to practice (NCFR Report 2012). Of note, access to much of the professional resources is limited to NCFR membership.

Future Directions of the Role of Spirituality in Social Work and Family Studies

Across both fields, more work is needed to improve understanding of how spirituality can inform practice. The field of social work is further along this path, with published work on ways to assess spirituality in practice, developing spiritual practice, and research on what spiritual interventions are actually effective and the contexts they are successful in (Hodge 2006, 2007, 2011, 2013a, b). Additionally, Hodge (2007) and Hodge and Bushfield (2007) provided a method for the field to train social workers on spiritual competencies, something that wasn't and appears to still not be consistent across curriculums. Family studies have not reached this level of scrutiny (i.e., systematic reviews and Meta analyses) regarding how CFLEs practice in the domain of youth development. Thus, both fields have room to grow regarding developing mechanisms (or theories) to explain how to incorporate spirituality into practice as well as constructing specific evidence based spiritual interventions that can be used in practice.

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