

The Role of Religion and Spirituality Among Social Work Field Instructors

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Spirituality and religion are important concerns in the lives of many, if not most, people who seek out or receive social work services. People confronted with concerns such as trauma, illness, loss or bereavement, substance abuse, or violence in the home or workplace may be particularly likely to seek solace in spiritual and religious beliefs and support systems. As such, there is increasing recognition in social work that discussions about, and knowledge of spirituality and religion are of importance to social work practitioners, educators, researchers, and students. Hence, social workers are recognizing the importance of the bio-psycho-social-spiritual approach to human behavior. Students must be offered guidance and the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills in how best to address issues of spirituality and religion when these concerns are of importance to social work clients. Field education is one of the best places for this instruction to occur. However, there is little information in the literature that discusses the attitudes and beliefs of field instructors toward issues of spirituality and religion. As such, given the importance of the role of field instructors in guiding social work students, and in an effort to explore these issues, neglected by current research, field instructors from Binghamton University; St. Louis University; University of Missouri, St. Louis; and Washington University were contacted by e-mail and asked to participate in a study designed to shed light on the role of spirituality and religion in social work field education. Some of the major themes that emerged from the survey data, and that will be briefly explored in this article, include the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of field instructors and in their work with social work clients, the relevance of concerns related to religion and spirituality in social work field supervision, and the need for preparation and education related to religion and spirituality for social work students.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic data collected from the 129 survey respondents indicated that 75% of respondents were women, 25 % were men and the ages of respondents ranged from 27 to 61 years. Ethnicity of respondents included white/Anglo-American (85%), African American (9 %), and Asian American (2 %). Approximately 5% of respondents indicated ethnic identities that did not neatly fall into the categories offered, and these included Anglo-Chicano, African, Foreign-born white, Jewish, and American (5%). Notably, no respondents indicated Hispanic, Latino, or First Nations/Native ethnicity. Current religious preference of respondents included Roman Catholicism (30%), Protestant (28%), Judaism (9%), Buddhist (8%), Agnostic (6%), Psychology/Humanism (3%), Native American (2%), Quaker (2%), Atheist (1%), and Hinduism (1 %). A further indication of the spiritual diversity of this population is reflected in the use of the “other” category, which comprised 23% of respondents and included religious preferences such as Ecumenical Catholic Communion, Christian, Christian Science, Spirituality, Orthodox Christian, Pentecostal Apostolic, Pagan, Unitarian Universalist, non-denominational, and no preference. Practice settings, in which the field instructor supervised students, represented a broad cross-section of sites with the most common settings including nonprofit agencies (54%) mental health agencies (25%), and hospital/health care settings (19%). Among the other settings represented were schools, child welfare, and public

social services. Approximately 17% of respondents reported that they work, and supervise interns, in a religious setting.

Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Field Instructors

Field instructors reported strong connections to religion and spirituality with 92% of respondents indicating agreement with the statement, “I consider myself a spiritual person agree” and 61% of respondents agreeing with the statement, “ I consider myself a religious person.” One interesting finding of note is that while nearly half of field instructors (47%) strongly agreed with the statement, “I consider myself to be a spiritual person.”, fewer respondents (17%) indicated strong agreement with the statement, “I consider myself a religious person.” A majority of respondents reported either regular or active participation in a religious or spiritual organization (60%). Not surprisingly, then, the majority of field instructors reported that they pray often (61%) or occasionally (24%) and that they meditate often (22%) or occasionally (50%). Moreover, the majority of field instructors indicated that they consider doing social work to be a part of their own spiritual path (72%). The majority of field instructors, when asked about the connection between health and religion and spirituality indicated the belief that there is a relationship between spiritual health and physical health (90%) and between religious beliefs and physical health (55%). Correspondingly, the majority of respondents indicated the belief that there is a relationship between spiritual health and mental health (90%) and between religious beliefs and mental health (58%).

Field Instructor’s Work with Social Work Clients

In their own work with clients, social work field instructors reported that clients occasionally or often present with spiritual or religious issues (72%). While it is apparent, then that these concerns are being addressed in their work with clients, when asked to rate their feelings of personal competence to counsel clients regarding religious and spiritual issues, only 28% of field supervisors felt competent concerning issues of religion while 54% felt competent dealing with matters of spirituality. Not surprisingly then, there is a varied reaction by field instructors when asked about the likelihood of integrating spirituality into client assessments and client interventions. The most frequent response was that respondents never integrated spiritual assessments into their practice (33%). Others indicated that they integrated spiritual assessments on a seldom basis (25%), or an occasional basis (22%), or often (21%). Similarly, the most frequent response regarding the integration of spiritual interventions in practice was never (31%), followed by the integration of spiritual interventions in practice on an occasional basis (31%), on a seldom basis (28%), or often (10%).

These figures may well reflect a level of uncertainty in regard to the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. While field instructors were overwhelmingly in agreement (90%) that social workers can use a client’s spirituality to aid them in the development of coping skills, there is more variability in the beliefs toward the role of religion and spirituality in the social work profession. For example, while most field instructors indicated that they do not believe integrating spirituality in social work practice conflicts with the profession’s values or ethics, there were those respondents who indicated a belief that integrating spirituality in social work practice does conflicts with the professions values or ethics (22%). The figures regarding the integration of

religion in social work practice were even more pronounced with the majority of field instructors (59%) indicating the belief that integrating religion in social work practice conflicts with the profession's values or ethics.

Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Field Supervision

It is clear from the survey data that issues of religion and spirituality may arise in field supervision and that most field instructors are comfortable with discussions of these concerns in supervision with students in field placements. Field instructors indicated that religious issues have been discussed in supervision sessions with field students with which they work at least on an occasional basis (40%) and some field instructors indicated that religious issues are often (7%) discussed in field supervision. Similarly, field instructors indicated that spiritual issues are occasionally (44%) addressed in field supervision and some field instructors indicated that spiritual issues are often (16%) discussed in field supervision. The majority of field instructors reported that they are comfortable with discussions of spirituality (78%) and with discussions of religious concerns (69%) in supervision with students in field placements. Field instructors also indicated that they were likely to encourage students to work with the client's spiritual issues (41%) and to work with the client's religious issues (26%).

However, while some students will be exposed to issues of religion and spirituality in the field placement, field instructors also reported that it is possible that students will not have the opportunity to work with the client's religious or spiritual issues. Field instructors are most likely to report that students seldom (34%) or never (23%) had the opportunity to work with the client's spiritual issues in field placements. Similar reports occurred for religious concerns with field instructors most likely to report that students seldom (33%) or never (29%) had the opportunity to work with the client's spiritual issues in field placements.

Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education

While the majority (77%) of field instructors agreed that social work graduate programs should provide instruction on working with the client's spiritual issues as part of the required practice curriculum, the majority of respondents indicated that in their own social work graduate education, religious or spiritual issues were only seldom or occasionally presented and discussed (72%). This may explain the fact that only 37% percent of respondents believe that social workers, in general, possess the knowledge and skills to assist clients in their spiritual development.

Some Concluding Comments

It is important to note, prior to a discussion of the research conclusions, that it is quite likely that those who participated in this research may have had a particular interest in spirituality or religion and that would certainly influence the data collected. Even so, although it is premature to draw conclusions from the data at this point in the analysis, it is clear that concerns of religion and spirituality are being addressed in social work field education and that field instructors are playing a crucial role in guiding students in this area. However, it also appears that there is a level of uncertainty in regard to the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice, education, and the profession in general. It is essential then that field instructors receive guidance about the appropriate use of

spiritual and religious tools such as spiritual assessments and spiritual interventions in social work field education so that interactions with students are meaningful in this topic area. Furthermore, this research indicates the importance of dialogue among field directors, educators, students, and field instructors about the role of religion and spirituality in social work field education.

Betsy Wisner, currently a lecturer at SUNY Cortland and doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work, conducted the study discussed in this article. Dr. Robin Russel supervised the project. Thank you to all who participated and made this research possible.