ETHICAL ISSUES IN SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The inclusion of spiritual matters into social work treatment creates many ethical concerns for the social worker. Social workers must clarify their own spiritual values before trying to help clients incorporate their spirituality into healing. The social worker also must utilize tools that will assist in determining if the client would be served in a more productive way with the inclusion of spiritual issues in counseling. Spiritual assessment or screening should be incorporated into every assessment to give added information on the importance of spiritual matters to the client. The social worker must understand that spirituality is an aspect of diversity just as ethnicity and race. When utilizing spirituality as a strength and an aspect of diversity, the social worker must self monitor to avoid any violations of ethical principles.

The 1994 revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSMIV) included a new category for religious or spiritual problems. This new category prompted considerations about how to incorporate issues of spirituality into counseling. There is a need for assessment tools to assist therapists when assessing client spirituality.

Spiritual beliefs encompass the beliefs and feelings one attaches to those aspects of life such as God or a higher power, the purpose and meaning of life, suffering, good and evil, and death (Richards & Bergin, 2002).   Spiritual beliefs are often tied to values, which include beliefs, preferences, or assumptions about what is desirable or good for man (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). Values help determine our actions.

 Incorporating spirituality into counseling can create ethical concerns for social workers, such as the need to keep a professional perspective when spiritual matters because they are personal. Social workers need to develop an understanding of how values drive a person's life and influence the decisions that people make (Fong & Furuto, 2001). For many people, their identity is linked to beliefs about right and wrong. Likewise, spiritual beliefs help determine the areas of life in which a person attaches meaning. For many, the spiritual aspect of life is what gives hope for a better life in the future. At the point when people seek professional counseling, they have usually exhausted most of the support systems and options in their normal problem-solving repertoire. Social workers usually see clients when they have run out of options, resources, and hope.

The social worker provides the link back to a functioning life usually by working with the different systems that have impacted the client. Many clients draw support from their faith group, and it is useful to consider using those resources to assist with healing and rebuilding hope. Likewise, one's spiritual perspective can prevent despair and acts of desperation, like

suicide, particularly if those beliefs include a belief in an afterlife. A person's spiritual beliefs can also cause difficulties if one is experiencing guilt or despair over one's actions or if the course one's life has taken conflicts with one's spiritual values. Troubled personal development and troubled religiosity seem to go together (Bergin 1991). Whether spiritual beliefs are a positive or negative influence, it is useful for social workers to understand the client's perspective and ideas in reference to their spiritual beliefs.

Religion or spiritual beliefs can serve many purposes in a client's life. One's spiritual beliefs can help establish norms, values, and moral character; serve as a social control to help foster order, discipline, and authority; provide emotional support; give a sense of identity; and be a source or positive physical and mental health. Spiritual beliefs can also lead to socially dysfunctional behaviors, such as fanaticism, intolerance, and prejudice, and can divide society into believers and non-believers. Likewise, spiritual beliefs often support the establishment, directly or indirectly, by directing attention away from social injustices, and in this way they may perpetuate these injustices (Loewenberg, 1988).

It is imperative that social work professionals comprehend the values that are the driving forces in their own lives so they can consciously examine the implications of the value choices clients make and minimize the projection of their own values. There is an evolution that takes place when one enters a profession. This evolution process first becomes evident in field placements and internships. Issues that could be potential conflicts based on a student's spiritual roots arise and must be resolved and clarified in field placements so they will not carry over into professional practice. A personal spiritual assessment using the profession's code of ethics can help clarify areas of conflict with a professional's spiritual roots.

Most counseling professions have some core values and beliefs. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) identifies six core values for the social work profession. These values help shape the decisions that social workers make in their work with clients. The ethical principles outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics are: (1) service to help people in need and to address social problems; (2) social justice—to challenge social injustice; (3) dignity and worth of the person--respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person; (4) importance of human relationships--recognize the central importance of human relationships; (5) integrity--behave in a trustworthy manner; (6) competence—practice within areas of competence and enhance professional expertise (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996). When a professional evaluates these core values, they should find that they are consistent with his or her personal beliefs and values. Inconsistencies could lead to unethical or ineffective practice. As a person takes on a professional identity, his or her own value system should blend with the values of the profession.

Reamer and Conrad have developed a series of steps for ethical problem solving. These steps can serve as a guideline for social workers when they perceive that incorporating spirituality may violate one of the ethical principles listed above and may create a potential ethical dilemma. These steps are:

(1)   determine if there is an ethical dilemma

(2)   identify key values, principles and knowledge central to the dilemma

(3)   prioritize relevant values and ethical principles

(4)   face any personal biases that could cloud your perspective

(5)   consult with colleagues about the dilemma as needed

(6)   develop an action plan consistent with the ethical values identified

(7)   implement the plan using the most appropriate practice skills and areas of competence

(8)   Reflect on the outcome of the ethical decision making process (NASW video, 1995).

The problem solving steps listed above, if followed, would allow a social work practitioner to avoid any violations of ethical principles. Social workers can avoid difficulties in practice if they reflect on the outcome of all practice decisions. These steps provide a clear framework for a therapist to evaluate any ethical dilemmas he or she may face.

Spiritual assessment allows skilled therapists to use their skills to assist clients incorporate the strengths from their spiritual life into solving their problems. Spiritual assessment also provides the opportunity for therapists to review any negative influences that have come from a client's spiritual point of view. If a therapist is aware of the possible ethical violations that may arise when dealing with spiritual matters, he or she can constantly monitor the situation and prevent ethical violations. The key to prevention is self-awareness and constant assessment of one's practice. Therapists who have gone through the process of clarifying their own spiritual values have the freedom to incorporate this dimension of strength into their practices without fear of violating ethical principles and values set forth by their professions.

Another approach to assessing the importance of spirituality is to consider it a diversity issue. A major thrust in Social Work education prepares students for culturally sensitive practice. Because religion and spirituality exist in all cultures, it is essential that social workers and therapists understand the influence of spirituality on their clients and in their own lives. The next section of this paper focuses on the incorporating spirituality into practice as a diversity issue.

Spirituality as Diversity

The Preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics states that "social workers should be sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social justice"(NASW, 1996). The Code of Ethics promotes the principle that

social workers are to respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person, especially in the areas

of diversity" (NASW, 1996). The NASW Board of Directors, at its June 2001 meeting accepted

the following definition of culture: "The word 'culture' is used because it implies the integrated

pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs,

values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group" (NASW, 1996).

In order to better clarify these areas mentioned in the Code, the NASW Board of

Directors adopted the Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice in June, 2001.

These Standards were then endorsed by the Council on Social Work Education Board of

Directors in 2003**.** They state, "The term culture includes ways in which people with disabilities

or people from various religious people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender experience the

world around them (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001). In both the NASW

accepted definition of culture and the Standards for Cultural Competence, religion and beliefs are

directly mentioned. Therefore it can be stated that religion and spirituality are recognized as

important aspects of diversity that must be considered in ethical social work practice. In this

portion of the paper, these standards will be examined with a particular focus on the implications

for issues of spirituality as related to spiritual assessment.

**Standard 1.** "Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and

standards of the profession, recognizing how personal and professional values may conflict with

or accommodate the needs of diverse clients." (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence,

2001). Application of this standard to spirituality would imply that social workers must

recognize how their personal views of spirituality and past spiritual experiences may conflict

with those of a particular client with differing beliefs. On the other hand, commonalities with a

client's spiritual views may cause the social worker to tend to accommodate the needs of one

client over another or result in a bias that influences assessment and/or intervention. It may also determine whether a social worker sees a client's spiritual or religious beliefs to be a source of strength or pathology. Ethical practice necessitates self awareness which will prevent personal bias in making a diagnosis or treatment plan when doing assessment.

Standard 2. "Social workers shall seek to develop an understanding of their own personal, cultural values and beliefs as one way of appreciating the importance of multicultural identities in the lives of people." (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001). The importance of self-awareness and self-understanding is crucial in all areas of diversity and the area of spirituality is no exception. Social workers often have unresolved issues in the area of spirituality and may be on their own personal journey of self-discovery. This may be reflected in avoidance of the subject of spirituality with clients or a diminishing of the importance of personal faith or belief system to the client in matters such as problem solving or life goals. On the other hand, the social worker may give more importance to or have more interest in exploring issues of spirituality than the client. It is often helpful for a social worker to complete their own spiritual chronology or timeline which may assist them in examining the formation of their own belief system and values. Careful spiritual self-assessment will assist the social worker in determining the meaning and impact of spirituality in their life which in turn will enable them to better assess the impact of spirituality on the life of their clients.

Standard 3. "Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values family systems and artistic expressions of major client groups that they serve" (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001).   Those in the social work profession must recognize that culture is often closely impacted by the traditional practices of faith based groups and organizations. The artistic expressions of many

cultures are frequently tied to the practice of religion and can be an indication of commonly held spiritual views and values. Holidays are often reflections or celebrations of religious events or rituals. Not only is it necessary to understand major world religions, professionals must also acknowledgement the effects of within group diversity which results in varying values and beliefs. Social workers should relate the cultural and historical context of individual spirituality to other aspects of ethnicity. In order to comprehend an individual's world view, the social worker must investigate the influence of spirituality on their lives and their relationships and their environment. This is crucial to a holistic assessment of the person in their environment.

Standard 4. "Social workers shall use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect the worker understands of the role of culture in the helping process" (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001). With the current interest in spirituality, there has been an increase in both quantitative and qualitative spiritual assessment tools developed for use by professionals in a variety of practice settings. Many of these are focused on specific areas affected by client/patient spirituality such as health care and end of life issues. Among these are the HOPE questions which were developed for use in health settings as a practical first step in incorporating an individual's spirituality into treatment and the *Spiritual Interview* which is used primarily for individuals facing critical illnesses. These are often used in hospitals and hospices, but with minor changes could be applied in other settings (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001; Highfield, 2000).

Acknowledging the research that strongly indicates that spirituality is an important factor in the lives of individuals and families, other social work assessment tools commonly used by practitioners and regularly included in social work education practice curriculum, have been adapted to use in spiritual assessment. The spiritual ecomap is one of these tools. The spiritual

ecomap develops the spiritual domains that must be explored in order to provide an overview of spiritual functioning. The ecomap investigates three dimensions: 1) communion or the capacity to bond and relate with both spiritual beings and humans; 2) conscience or morality; and 3) intuition or knowledge that relates to insights that do not come through normal cognitive channels. Relationships that are explored in the spiritual ecomap include family of origin, individuals within the faith community and spiritual leaders. Also included are two additional areas for exploration: 1) transpersonal beings (such as angels and demons) and 2) rituals. Ecomaps can be used for assessment, planning and intervention. Spiritual interventions such as prayer, meditation, and cognitive restructuring may then be employed as an appropriately as an effective aspect of intervention (Hodge, 2000).

The spiritual genogram is a generational approach to assessing spirituality that can be used with both individuals and families. Values and spiritual beliefs are often passed on from generation to generation. They can also be the source of much intergenerational conflict. A spiritual genogram allows the practitioner to develop a visual of the intergenerational interactions and influences and the patterns developed in the family over time. Also included in a spiritual genogram are spiritual leaders, traditions and organizations such as religious organizations that have impacted the family. Significant spiritual experiences and encounters would be noted as well as conflicts within the family due to spiritual differences. The spiritual genogram allows a client/family to gain a clearer perspective on the ways that their spiritual/religious heritage has impacted their lives and affects their decisions and behavior. The spiritual genogram may be especially useful in doing a culturally sensitive assessment for clients of diverse ethnic groups (Frame, 2002; Hodge, 2001; Dunn & Dawes, 1999).

Stage models, narratives and spiritual histories are similar types of assessment which may focus on stages of spiritual development. The narrative assessment encourages the client to tell their story while the clinician listens and provides empathy and paraphrases responses. The narrative provides a framework for understanding the personal subjective reality of spirituality in the client's life. A religious or spiritual history is more direct in that it employs a series of questions to explore themes. It can be seen as an open-ended co-exploration of beliefs (Hodge, 2002; Hodge, 2001).

Ethically, a social worker should be familiar with these assessment tools and apply them as appropriate in a non-invasive manner. These tools assist the professionals in determining both the role of spirituality in the client's life and if possible interventions such as meditation and prayer that may be meaningful to the individual. Rather than look at spirituality as pathology, it encourages the worker to examine the client's spiritual experience from a strengths perspective.

Standard 5. "Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services available in the community and broader society and be able to make appropriate referrals for their diverse clients (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001)." An important aspect of assessment is the determination of social support which may be available to the client. For many individuals, a main source of support both financial and relational may be found in religiously or spiritually related organizations. Faith groups such as churches, synagogues or mosques often have well developed methods of assisting both members and other residents in their community in times of need. Social workers are ethically responsible to explore the possibility of such support during the process of assessment as well as including such resources in their list of referrals. Failure to do so due to personal negative bias against such groups may prevent the client from receiving necessary assistance. However, it is also critical not

to put a client into a situation in which they are required to receive services from faith based

groups with whom they have no relationship or with beliefs different from their own.

   Standard 6. "Social workers shall be aware of the effect of social policies and programs

on diverse client populations, advocating for and with clients whenever appropriate" (NASW

Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001).   The use of government funds to support attendance

at faith based schools as well as the grants made available to faith based organizations has been a

subject of much debate among social work professionals. Even if opposed theoretically or

politically to the distribution of these funds to these entities, social workers must assess the

benefit to an individual client and advocate for them to receive those services legally available to

them. Other policy or program issues often facing social workers are in the area of parental

provision of appropriate health care for a child and as the application of appropriate methods of

discipline. There are frequently ethical issues surrounding these which can be blurred or seem

contradictory when issues of self-determination and protection of life are involved. Spirituality

or religion may be at the core of the beliefs and actions of a client in these situations and it is

critical that the social worker consider this during the assessment process.

   Standard 7. "Social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and

hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and agencies that ensure diversity within the

profession" (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001). While those in the social work

profession are known to advocate for diversity among social work faculty and agency staff, the

focus tends to be on gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Rarely is diversity of faith group or

spirituality a consideration and it would be difficult to recruit and hire on such a basis. However,

bias or prejudice against a particular belief system should not be the basis of limiting or

increasing an individual's employment in the field of social work .Ethical practice would dictate

that social work colleagues should respect and honor each others expression of spirituality and be

open to learn from each other. There is value in having staffed and students from varying

spiritual traditions and belief systems, both conservative and more liberal. Staff and faculty

diversity provides clients and students with a model of collaboration and sharing together in

harmony and mutual growth.

      Standards 8 and 10. "Social workers shall advocate for and participate in educational and

training programs that help advance cultural competence within the profession" (NASW

Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001). "Social workers shall be able to communicate

information about diverse client groups to other professionals (NASW Standards for Cultural

Competence, 2001)." These two standards are similar in their emphasis on the development of a

knowledge base that is used both in practice and training situations. Education and the

accumulation of knowledge is an ongoing life long process for all social work professionals,

most of whom are required to obtain Continuing Education Units in order to maintain their

license. Social workers are constantly in the position of disseminating information concerning

areas of diversity, including spirituality and religion, both to and from clients and other

professionals on a daily basis. Competence in practice is considered an ethical necessity in order

to provide best services to clients. Understanding of diverse clients will only be possible with

knowledge concerning all aspects of their diversity, including religion and spirituality.

This implies that there will be acceptance of clients' right to self-determination in their

involvement in religious or spiritual activities along with a respect for their faith group.

      Professional journal articles, especially those that are research based, play an integral role

in imparting knowledge and providing an impetus to discussion concerning areas of spiritual

assessment and best social work practice principles. The fact that there have been an increasing

number of articles in this area shows increased awareness of the importance of this subject. Also encouraging is the growth of interdisciplinary discussions that are occurring in various settings which are contributing to understanding of spirituality and religion as an aspect of assessment. Especially important are interactions and relationship building with chaplains and faith leaders which lead to the information sharing and cooperation in intervention on the behalf of clients.

Standard 9. "Social workers shall seek to provide or advocate for the provision of information, referrals and services in the language appropriate to the client, which may include the use of interpreters" (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001). While most social workers would not readily identify language as issue related to spirituality, it is definitely an aspect that should be considered in communications with the client. Often styles and boundaries of language use are founded in an individual's spiritual heritage. There is some vocabulary that is prohibited while there are other expressions that are encouraged and have a special significance or meaning to participants of different faith groups. Religious and faith based language used by clients who are members of a particular faith group leaders may need to be explained and put into context for those outside the group. Social workers should not only be aware of the nuances of religious and spiritual language, but are also ethically responsible to learn vocabulary and seek out those who might be able to "interpret" the meaning and symbolism of certain statements and words. This may require contact and involving an appropriate spiritual leader.

Spiritual assessment is a process that must be completed on both a personal and a practice level in order for a therapist to make sure that his or her own values and spiritual ideas are not influencing client decisions.   Spiritual issues can be approached as an aspect of diversity and treated with the same respect as any other issue that is unique. Ethics are the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with human conduct and moral decision making (Dolgoff,

Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2005). Spirituality also encompasses how one conducts him or

herself and how he or she makes moral decisions. To avoid ethical difficulties, a practitioner

must constantly assess his or her own spirituality and how it is being incorporated into practice.

As one begins to develop a professional identity it is helpful to do a self-assessment, or values

clarification exercise, to understand how core beliefs and values shape him or her as a person.

With self-understanding, one is able to incorporate his or her own values and beliefs into work

with clients in an ethically responsible manner.

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