HOW SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS UNDERSTAND AND
UTILIZE SPIRITUALITY IN THE PRACTICE CONTEXT

by

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Preface: Researcher Assumptions

My interest in the topic of spirituality stems from my personal and professional experiences. From the time I was a young child, I have been involved in organized religion. I have attended church services on a consistent basis. My parents raised my sister and me on the religious principles espoused by Christianity. I have been involved at each stage of the lifespan in church-related groups such as Sunday School, youth group, young adult fellowship, and women’s ministries.

As an undergraduate, I attended a small, Christian, liberal arts college where, for the first time, I took on a religious identity that was my own. For me, my spirituality is understood and lived out in the context of organized religion. I cannot describe my life, my values, and my goals outside the context of my understanding of what life is about and my purpose in the world. Even the choices I make on a day-to-day basis are heavily influenced by my spiritual lens, which I must say has certainly evolved over the course of time.

My understanding of my own spirituality has been both a source of great comfort during difficult times in life and a source of distress as I look at the world around me and as I encounter suffering and pain; I cannot help but ponder deeply the hard questions of life, often not finding satisfactory answers. I think it is through the questioning, through the search for meaning and purpose in life, through the concerted effort to nourish the soul that I have grasped more fully the injustice in the world.

I currently teach social work at the BSW level at the very same college where I was an undergraduate. A unique aspect of teaching social work in the context of a religiously-based institution is the holistic approach to education that allows me, actually
requires me, to incorporate the discussion of religion and spirituality into every course I teach. This helps students to integrate their faith with the other aspects of who they are. Many of my social work majors describe their decision to pursue a career in social work using the language of “calling.”

Reminiscent of the early founders of social work who were compelled by their religious beliefs to act on behalf of the vulnerable, my students understand social work as more than a job, more than a career. For many, it’s a way to give meaning to their lives. The danger occurs when graduates go out into the field and are constantly exposed to abuse, violence, poverty, and oppression through their work with clients. If they are not able to give voice to these experiences, to “make sense” of them, there is a likelihood of burnout. To me, this is a spiritual endeavor. I think those who stay in the profession and continue to make a difference in the lives of clients do so because they have found ways to integrate these experiences which moves them along in their own spiritual development which comes back full circle with implications for future professional work.

The following thoughts reflect on my own understanding of spirituality, which naturally frames any study I attempt to undertake. Spirituality is a “real” concept. Its characteristics are identifiable. When you talk with people about spirituality, you hear similar themes. There is an element of mystery, however. When you define spirituality as relating somehow to a higher power, something beyond ourselves, something transcendent, you touch the sacred. I think it’s this “mystery” piece that causes some to question whether or not the scientific study of spirituality should be undertaken. As long as one is comfortable accepting this about spirituality, one can proceed into a discussion
of what parts of the reality of spirituality can one know and understand. And, of course, what difference does our knowledge and understanding of spirituality make?

Although spirituality is a reality, it is complex and multidimensional. There are many aspects of what spirituality is and the impact of spirituality on human well-being. There are many ways in which spirituality is understood by people—contexts such as culture, religion, personal experiences. There are many ways in which spirituality is expressed by people. There are specific products or outcomes that are a result of spirituality.

Spirituality is a developmental process rather than a state of being. It isn’t fair to say that someone lacks spirituality. Instead, spirituality is something that is inherent in all human beings. Every person is a spiritual being. Everyone has the potential to develop and grow in their spirituality. Some do, and some don’t, again based on contextual factors, but concern for spiritual development should be as important to helping professionals as biological, psychological, and social development. Spirituality is a dynamic process. Although spirituality is very personal, it is not necessarily individualistic. The essence of spirituality is in relationships; to self, others, a higher power, and/or the cosmos. Spirituality is best nurtured in a communal context.

Spirituality, in its broadest definition, is the process through which human beings attempt to discover meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality can be an organizing mechanism in a person’s life; the core around which life is structured. In this way, spirituality has the potential to unify.

I’m drawn to the larger question of the potential impact that spirituality could have on ameliorating social problems. If each person was aware of his or her own
spirituality and was intentional about understanding and using spirituality in everyday life, about connecting to others and transcending the self, how would society be transformed? Would discrimination end? Would violence stop? Would we take responsibility for the care of the poor and the vulnerable? Would depression no longer exist? While I recognize the important role of spirituality in the lives of individual clients, I’m wondering if it’s bigger than that.
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Last but not least, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family. I offer a special thanks to my parents, Cecil and Lois Reed, for always raising me to believe that I can do anything. My husband, Jeffrey Barker, has always understood and supported my life-long goals and did all he could in tangible ways to see me through this dissertation. Now it’s my turn to see him through his! My daughters, Emily and Abigail, were just 4 and 2 when I started this program five years ago. I appreciate the unknowing sacrifice they made on my behalf; as a mother, my greatest desire is to be a good role model for my children. Because of the support, love, and care of my family, this goal is now a reality.
How Social Work Practitioners Understand and Utilize

Spirituality in the Practice Context

Abstract

by

STACEY L. BARKER

Spirituality has become a significant topic of interest in social work over the past two decades. In fact, the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) (1999) focus on cultural competence in its Code of Ethics includes spiritual diversity. Accreditation standards established by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2001) require that social work educational programs include spiritual issues in their frameworks for understanding human diversity and populations-at-risk. As the literature suggests, studies on the topic of social work and spirituality include both quantitative and qualitative methodologies designed to explore attitudes towards the inclusion of spirituality in social work and definitions of spirituality. Samples have included social work practitioners, social work educators, and social work students. In this grounded theory research study, I address how social workers define spirituality, how they understand the fit between spirituality and social work practice in the greater social context, and how they use spirituality both personally and professionally. Respondents understand spirituality as being individually defined, having several characteristics and many dimensions that address meaning and purpose in life. Practitioners feel that spirituality and social work generally fit well together, but acknowledge several challenges to this integration process. These social workers use spirituality and its related concepts in the practice
context in a variety of ways, despite a lack of specific training in how to do so. Use of spirituality in direct work with clients is client-driven. For many practitioners, the practice of social work itself is viewed as a spiritual experience. I offer implications for social work research, education, and practice.
Chapter 1: Introduction

We are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings seeking a human experience. ~Teilhard de Chardin

In this grounded theory study, I will examine how social work practitioners make meaning of spirituality and its use in the practice context. The topic of spirituality has received increased interest in the general society and in the social work profession over the past two decades. For example, an article in *Time* magazine ("How spiritual are you?", 2004) offers a quiz to readers who were interested in finding out how spiritual they are. Television networks have responded to this interest with programs like Touched by an Angel and Seventh Heaven (Aguilar, 1997). Many self-help and other inspirational books on spiritual topics have become bestsellers. The National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) (1999) focus on cultural competence in its Code of Ethics includes spiritual diversity. Accreditation standards established by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2001) require that social work educational programs include spiritual issues in their frameworks for understanding human diversity and populations-at-risk.

As I will show in the literature review, spirituality has become a significant topic of research in social work, spanning a period of 20 years. Studies in social work and spirituality include both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Interest in spirituality as a research topic in social work parallels the process in other professions such as medicine and nursing. And the spiritual and/or religious roots on which the social work profession was founded cannot be ignored (Leighninger, 2000). Social work
has much in common with the tenets of the major world religions, and all religions are concerned in some way about spiritual issues.

What, though, do we really mean by spirituality? It is indeed a difficult concept to define and is typically thought of as a very personal topic. A quick review of the literature reveals a broad spectrum of ways in which spirituality is conceptualized, particularly across disciplines (Chui, Emblen, Hofwegen, Sawatzky, & Meyerhoff, 2004; Dyson, Cobb, & Forman, 1997; Galek, Flannelly, Vane, & Galek, 2005; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000; Tanyi, 2002; Villagomeza, 2005) but even within the social work profession (Canda, 1983, 1986, 1988; Canda & Furman, 1999; Carroll, 1998, 2001; Hodge, 2000, 2005a; Hodge & McGrew, 2005). As many researchers have noted, definitions of spirituality are often contradictory, or inconsistent at best.

Spirituality and religion are defined, in most cases, as distinct concepts that overlap, with spirituality generally understood as the broader construct having to do with meaning-making and religion as an organized set of beliefs and practices that can assist people in their process of meaning-making. While both concepts are important in social work education and practice, I seek clarity in the meaning and use of spirituality.

Is there something in the idea of spirituality that comes close to “common” within the profession so the concept can be used systematically? Hamdy (2004) asserts that “reproducibility and accuracy of measurement are the cornerstones of science” (p. 1149). This leads to skepticism concerning anything that can’t be “measured or reproduced under strict laboratory conditions” (p. 1149). This assertion highlights the complexity of the scientific study of a concept like spirituality which, in its current understanding, is
nebulous. In further attempts to study spirituality and its role in the social work profession, “it is important to move toward greater degrees of conceptual clarity that approximate shared understandings” (Hodge & McGrew, 2005, p. 2).

Research indicates that most practitioners are comfortable with recognizing and using client spirituality in practice, particularly in identifying client strengths and challenges (Derezotes & Evans, 1995; Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2005; Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Staral, 1991). However, there is probably less comfort and less attention given to the role of practitioner spirituality in practice, although in social work we do emphasize the importance of self-awareness and the use of self. Kamya (2000) reports significant relationships between hardiness, spiritual well-being, and self-esteem in a sample of 105 social work students, suggesting that the role of spiritual well-being has “implications for research, practice, and education” (p. 231). Collins (2005) asserts that “self-care is a spiritual act” (p. 264). Singletary (2005) suggests that the practice of social work itself encourages practitioners to reflect on the spiritual.

There are far fewer studies demonstrating how practitioners use their understanding of spirituality in the practice context. One study from the nursing literature (Boero, Caviglia, Monteverdi, Braida, Fabello, & Zorella, 2005) supports this premise, and asserts that nursing “staff should be aware of their own spirituality, in order to offer better health care and address the varying needs of patients.” I will use the phrase “practice context” in this study because practitioners should think broadly about the use of spirituality, not just when working directly with client systems, but even how practitioners might use spirituality in their own developmental process. For the purposes
of this study, I define “practice context” as all of the facets that contribute to our work with clients, including: the practitioner (ourselves), the client, the relationship between ourselves and the client, the agency under which the services are provided, supervisory relationships, and the social work profession, particularly ethical mandates.

Theoretical Frameworks

Vicktor Frankl, renowned psychiatrist, survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, and developer of logotherapy, provides a framework for understanding the spiritual in his book entitled *Man’s Search for Meaning* (revised and updated, 1984). According to Frankl, “man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life” (p. 121) and requires an embracing of ideals and values that a person is willing to live and die for. According to Frankl, human beings can find meaning in life in three different ways: by creating a work or by doing a deed; by experiencing something or encountering someone; and through suffering (p. 133).

Accomplishment and achievement are the products of works and deeds, while love is the product of experiencing other human beings. While suffering is not necessary for meaning-making, meaning is possible in the midst of suffering. Frankl (1984) asserts that in suffering, one “rises above self” and “grows beyond self” (p. 133). Frankl also emphasizes that “the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and hour to hour” (p. 131). In other words, the spiritual quest is not just about making meaning of a whole lifetime, but finding the specific meaning of a person’s life and a given moment in time.

Another theoretical consideration at the outset of this study is *spirituality as a way of knowing*. For many, many decades, science and the scientific method have ruled the
way we think about knowledge and reality. Clarke (2005) asserts a centuries-old hierarchical structure of knowing—with science and religion alternating at the top of the hierarchy at different times—with all other ways of knowing descending the chain and inferior to the one above. Foucault (as cited in Clarke) used the term “subjugated ways of knowing” (p. 5) to identify the contributions of groups of people who are often “suppressed, hidden and forgotten” in the context of the dominant culture, including women and indigenous people. Clarke also suggests that it’s time that alternative ways of knowing have equal footing with “academic analysis” (p. 3).

Embracing spirituality as an alternative way of knowing is compatible with one of the important goals of social work: promoting social justice. Allowing unheard voices to be heard through the use of storytelling and narrative and recognizing spirituality “as a way of knowing independently and in its own right” (Clarke, 2005, p. 6) begins to equal the playing field. The philosophy behind qualitative research methods addresses the very issue of subjugated ways of knowing; its emphasis on narrative, its focus on depth, its partnership between researcher and subject, all address the philosophical concerns inherent in positivistic frameworks.

Specifically in this study, I aim to explore how social work practitioners understand the concept of spirituality and how they experience spirituality in the practice context. I address the following research questions:

- What is similar and different in the way social workers make sense of the idea of spirituality? More specifically, what is similar and different in the way older and younger social workers who are religious and non-religious make sense of the idea of spirituality?
• How do social work practitioners make sense of the fit between spirituality and professional social work? The fit between spirituality and their particular agency contexts?

• What do social work practitioners say about the use of spirituality concepts in their practice contexts, such as assessment and intervention, talk with other practitioners, or self-care?
Chapter 2: Background and Rationale

In order to more fully understand the context in which this particular research project emerges, I provide a summary of the professional literature in social work and in related professions which demonstrates the significance of spirituality as a topic of study.

The Social Work Literature

The inclusion of spirituality content in social work education and the use of spirituality in practice is supported in the literature (Canda, 1988; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Sheridan & Wilmer, 1994; Derezotes, 1995; Derezotes & Evans, 1995; Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999; Canda & Furman, 1999; Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2005). These studies include the views of faculty, students, and practitioners, but none address client views.

Canda’s (1988) early study on the role of spirituality in social work demonstrated, through interviews with 18 social workers who were identified as contributors to the field of spiritually sensitive social work practice, several useful themes. These included: spirituality as an integral component of practice with clients, the preferences of clients dictate how spiritual issues are addressed in practice, and the ability of practitioners to maintain their own spiritual worldview while appreciating and respecting the diverse spiritual beliefs of others. This study was one of the first attempts at conceptualizing spirituality in the social work profession and set the course for future research.

Faculty views

Another early study by Dudley & Helfgott (1990) explored the views of 53 full-time faculty from four institutions in two Eastern states regarding the inclusion of religious and spiritual content in their social work educational programs. Using a survey
instrument, respondents affirmed that spirituality is both a fundamental aspect of being human and an issue related to diversity. Most respondents indicated that they would support spirituality and religion content as an elective course, and many disagreed that a spiritual component in practice is more empowering to clients. Respondents were most concerned with the potential conflict between the separation of church and state rather than concerns with conflict between social work mission and values. This study also demonstrates the still-strong link between religion and spirituality as overlapping constructs.

Expanding on the work of Dudley and Helfgott (1990), Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson (1994) surveyed 280 full-time social work educators from 25 schools of social work about their views on the use of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice. About 82% of respondents supported the inclusion of a specialized course on religion and spirituality, primarily as an elective. Also, faculty with a positive attitude toward religion and spirituality were more likely to support the inclusion of such content. The concepts of spirituality and religion were clearly defined by the researchers to emphasize that one is not the same as the other. Areas of conflict included separation of church and state, clients’ belief, how content is taught, and personal conflict for some faculty members. Again, the majority of respondents in this study reported receiving little or no professional training in this area.

Practitioner views

In a study of 328 randomly-selected licensed clinical social workers, psychologists, and professional counselors in Virginia, Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, and Miller (1992) found that practitioners valued the religious and spiritual dimensions of
their own lives and were willing to address religious or spiritual issues in their work with clients. The social work respondents (n=109) also reported that about one third of clients presented with a religious or spiritual issue as some point in the treatment process. While a majority of the social work respondents reported using spiritually-oriented assessment and interventions in practice (such as helping clients clarify their spiritual or religious values, using religious or spiritual language, and linking clients to spiritual or religious programs), most also reported that they had received little to no professional training related to religion and spirituality.

Derezotes (1995) found similar results in his survey of 340 members of the National Association of Social Workers in Utah and Idaho. The majority of respondents agreed that they addressed spiritual issues in practice and that working with a client’s spirituality is important; most reported that they had received little to no content on religion and spirituality in their social work educational programs. As a result, Derezotes suggested that curriculum content include models of spiritual development, religious traditions, understanding diversity of values, and assessment and intervention skills.

In a qualitative follow-up with 56 respondents who participated in the larger study, Derezotes and Evans (1995) reported that those who were interviewed viewed religion and spirituality as separate concepts, yet both are important considerations in education and practice. Respondents also felt that social workers should consider their own spiritual growth as part of spiritually-sensitive practice.

Canda and Furman (1999) conducted a national survey of social workers (n=1,069) and found that a majority of respondents used spiritually-oriented activities with clients and did not believe that integrating religion and spirituality in social practice
conflicted with the NASW Code of Ethics, separation of church and state, or social work’s mission.

In a comparative study of British and U.S. social workers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of religion and spirituality in education and practice, Furman, Benson, Grimwood, and Canda (2005) found that social workers in the U.S. are more accepting of religion and spirituality, even among respondents who identify as non-religious. Also, a majority of respondents in both countries indicated a lack of content on religion and spirituality in their social work training programs.

Student views

Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert (1999) surveyed 208 MSW students from two schools of social work on their views of spirituality and religion content in social work education and practice. Again, the terms spirituality and religion were clearly defined for respondents. Spirituality was defined as “the human search for purpose and meaning of life experiences, which may or may not involve expressions within a formal religious institution” (Study questionnaire section, para 1). Religion was defined as “a systematic body of beliefs and practices related to a spiritual search” (Study questionnaire section, para. 1). Respondents agreed that spirituality is relevant as both multicultural diversity and as a dimension of human existence. Along with asking students questions similar to those asked of faculty in the 1994 study, there was an intervention component that asked how spirituality or religion is being used with clients. While most respondents said that spiritually-oriented interventions are appropriate, most indicated they had received little to no training in their social work studies.
Graff (2007) surveyed 324 undergraduate social work students from 7 schools accredited by CSWE in the state of Texas about the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education. Students were asked to complete a four-page Religion/Spirituality and Social Work Questionnaire aimed at uncovering students’ personal spiritual beliefs, their beliefs about the use of religious/spiritual interventions in practice, and their beliefs about the inclusion of this content in social work education programs. Again, respondents agreed that social work courses should include content on religious and spiritual diversity and content on dealing with religious and spiritual issues in practice. A majority of respondents were open to incorporating some religious/spiritual content into their practice with clients.

So, where does the social work profession currently stand in terms of its research base related to spirituality and religion? As the literature review shows, most of the studies are attitudinal in nature, and utilize self-report surveys. Using cross-sectional, correlational designs means that inferences about causal relationships cannot be made; only descriptive information about relevant variables. Another limitation of survey research is the information gained through a structured, quantitative survey does not allow the researcher to probe for deeper responses to the questions or to clarify responses. For example, in many of the studies reviewed here, respondents were provided with definitions of spirituality and religion and then asked to what level they agreed with the given definitions. An alternative approach would be to let social workers talk about what spirituality is, and then develop a conceptualization based on narrative responses.

Much of this literature does not specify what content should be included in social work education and whether or not any focus is on the spirituality of the practitioner.
This is another area for further research. Many people feel the integration of spirituality and social work is an important issue; the focus now is on the “how.”

**Conceptualization of Spirituality in Social Work**

The social work literature demonstrates various attempts over the years to conceptualize spirituality (Bullis, 1996; Canda, 1983, 1986, 1988; Canda & Furman, 1999; Carroll, 1998, 2001; Derezotes, 1995; Hodge, 2000, 2005a; Hodge & McGrew, 2005), yet recognizes that there is no “universal” conceptualization that is used in the profession. Current conceptualizations are based primarily on theory, with very little empirical support for one conceptualization over another.

Ortiz, Villereal, and Engel (2000) recognize that the use of the term “spirituality” is often inconsistent in the literature, sometimes implying religion, sometimes faith, and sometimes spirituality in a broader sense. While spirituality is an issue of diversity (i.e., a part of ethnic identity for some cultures), spirituality is also an “essential dimension of human life” (p. 22). Spirituality is a personal experience that has potential to transform our understanding and our being. The problem of clarity in the current literature “involves a failure to distinguish spirituality in its transcendent sense from its institutional form” (p. 30).

Spirituality in the social work context has been broadly described by Canda (1988) as the relationships between and among self, others, a higher power, and the universe and the quest for meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, the bio-psycho-social view of human nature, as embraced by social work, is conducive to the inclusion of the spiritual dimension. Spirituality involves “understanding the interconnectedness of all people” which inspires a sense of “mutual responsibility” and “spiritual ways of living,”
including compassion, justice, and helping (Canda, 1998/1999, Abstract). A conceptualization of spirituality that honors social work professional values must be respectful of diverse religious and nonreligious expressions of spirituality. It must be inclusive. Spirituality has also been described as “the relationship of the human person to something or someone who transcends themselves” (Bullis, 1996, p. 2). Spirituality also encompasses “that which is regarded as sacred” and is “the motivational and emotional foundation for the quest for meaning” (Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, 2007, pp. 332-333).

Carroll (2001) describes seven distinct conceptual models in the literature that aid in our understanding of spirituality; she offers an eighth model in her theoretical work. These models come from a variety of disciplines including psychology, theology, health, and social work; some have a distinct interdisciplinary flavor to them.

The Vertical-Horizontal Approach to spirituality (Ellison, 1983, as cited in Carroll, 2001) emphasizes a heaven-earth worldview. The vertical dimension “refers to the relationship with God or the transcendent which is beyond and/or outside of self and is the source of the supreme values which guide one’s life” (p. 7). The horizontal dimension “refers to the kind and quality of one’s relationships with self and others, to well-being in relation to self and others, and to a sense of life purpose and satisfaction” (pp. 7-8). The vertical and horizontal dimensions are intertwined. For example, a relationship with the transcendent provides the context for relationships with others. But the dimensions are also different and help us conceptualize spirituality as it is manifested in distinct ways. For example, human relationships are as much a manifestation of spirituality as is a relationship with God.
The Five Levels of Consciousness model (Vaughan, 1985/1995 as cited in Carroll, 2001) depicts a series of concentric circles containing the physical, emotional, mental, existential, and spiritual dimensions of human existence all contained in the context of the Absolute Spirit. According to this model, “each level involves acceptance and observation. Awareness of the outer levels requires that the preceding levels be relatively calm . . . healing the whole person depends on awareness of well-being on all of them” (p. 8). This model emphasizes the whole person and the inextricable connections between the dimensions of our existence.

The Integrated Approach and the Unifying Approach to understanding spirituality (Farran, Fitchett, Quiring-Emblen, and Burck, 1989, as cited in Carroll, 2001) both define spirituality as “the person’s ultimate commitment or value due to the human need to find meaning” (p. 9). However, the Integrated Approach gives equal footing to the physiological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual dimensions of human behavior and focuses on the role that each aspect plays in human functioning. The Unifying Approach, on the other hand, “views the spiritual dimension as a totality underlying, embracing, and unifying the other parts of the person” (p. 9). In other words, spirituality is described in this model as the core of human existence.

The Self-Other-Context-Spiritual (SOCS) Circle (Kilpatrick and Holland, 1990, as cited in Carroll, 2001) suggests that the “self” (subjective reality), the “other” (external world of objects and states), and the “context” (the world in the objective sense) form a triangle within a circle that is surrounded by the spiritual dimension, which provides values, meaning, and direction in life and faith as a way of understanding life (p. 10). The
spiritual dimension integrates the other three in a way that helps us make sense of life experiences.

A Holistic Model of Spirituality (Canda & Furman, 1999 as cited in Carroll, 2001) was developed by social workers. This model consists of three concentric circles, with the inner circle representing spirituality as the center of a person, the middle circle representing the biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual aspects of human behavior, and the outer circle representing spirituality as the “wholeness of the person in relationship with all” (p. 11). This model presents spirituality in three distinct, yet unifying, ways that emphasize how difficult it is to grasp the complexity of what spirituality is.

The Whole Person: A Model (Ellor, Netting, & Thibault, 1999 as cited in Carroll, 2001) is a three-dimensional model emphasizing a spiritual (top level), integrative (middle level), and traditional clinical (bottom level) dimension. The spiritual dimension “includes affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects” (p. 12). The traditional, clinical dimension includes the physical, emotional, and social aspects” (p. 12). The integrative dimension “provides the vehicle through which the spiritual dimension interacts with the traditional dimensions” (p. 12). This model offers an understanding of spirituality that attempts to bridge the perceived gap between the spiritual and the human.

In her summary of the usefulness of the above models in furthering an understanding of spirituality, Carroll (2001) states that all of the models “reflect the whole person and his or her dimensions but do so in different ways depending on the definition or meaning of spirituality” (p. 12). Carroll also emphasizes the developmental nature of spirituality, as described by theorists such as Jung, Maslow, Fowler, and
Wilber. Thus, she supports the notion that spiritual growth might be an important focus for social work and adds this essential piece to her own model, Spirituality: A Wholistic Model, which emphasizes the relationship between the transpersonal dimension and the bio-psycho-social dimension, grounded in a universal spiritual context, with permeable boundaries that “represent possibilities of growth and expansion upward and outward” (p. 17). In short, the conceptual models of spirituality reviewed by Carroll take on two general themes: spirituality as relationship with the transcendent or ultimate source of reality and spirituality as core nature.

Hodge (2000) describes religion and spirituality as distinct concepts, yet emphasizes that “all constructs including spirituality exist within, and are informed by, a particular social network” (p. 2). Religion, then, is a “visible, measurable manifestation of an inward spiritual reality” (p. 3), but so would other, less formalized but widely accepted beliefs and practices. This conceptualization implies that spirituality cannot be adequately observed or measured apart from some kind of tradition. It also implies that spirituality, although highly personal, is not an individual quest. It takes shape in a communal context.

Particularly in the social work literature, a clear attempt is made to conceptualize spirituality as separate from religion, while recognizing that for some, spirituality is enhanced through participation in organized religion. While recognizing the complexity of religion in our current political climate and the ways in which religion has been, and can be, used to foster oppression and discrimination, Praglin (2004) suggests “serious interdisciplinary engagement of spirituality and religion within social work theory and practice” (p. 75). She emphasizes the similarities in how spirituality is conceptualized
across disciplines and points to the rich literature on spirituality from other disciplines that social work should not ignore. Other disciplines seeking to integrate spiritual perspectives into their knowledge base include: medicine, nursing, pastoral counseling, psychiatry, and psychology (Praglin).

According to Praglin (2004), the social work profession can respond to the issue of the role of spirituality in one of four ways. The first response is one of resistance or avoidance, often espoused by practitioners who have a narrow view of spirituality and a negative view of religion, feel that dealing with spiritual issues is solely a clergy role, and are fearful of violating the separation of church and state.

A second response is a “no conflict” model that fully embraces spirituality as complementary to social work without consideration of potential challenges and without examining spirituality outside the confines of the social work profession (Praglin, 2004). A third response, which has found a place among social work professionals, is a complete separation of the terms “religion” and “spirituality” (Praglin). While this seems to fit the social work profession, it potentially ignores what can be learned from scholarship in the religious studies field, where spirituality is often discussed within the context of religious traditions.

A fourth response to the growing dialogue concerning spirituality and social work “insists upon a serious interdisciplinary engagement of spirituality and religion within social work theory and practice” (Praglin, 2004, p. 75). Religious studies as a discipline places the concept of spirituality in historical and sociological contexts. Social work emphasizes a legacy of social justice and empowerment. Serious collaboration and conversation between the two fields could benefit both.
Spiritual Development

For many practitioners, social work is understood as a “calling,” a vocation rather than a career, a spiritual activity in and of itself as it provides a context for finding meaning and purpose in life (Canda, 1998/1999; Singletary, 2005). Spiritual formation literature related to the spiritual disciplines offers an interesting way for social work practitioners to think about and use their practice as a modality for spiritual growth; acts of service is one way that people express their spirituality and are thus transformed by it. The focus here is on the spiritual development of the practitioner rather than that of the client.

Gumz, Wall, and Grossman (2003) demonstrate the integration of social work practice and Ignatian spirituality using qualitative methodology. In this study, a group of social work faculty and students participated in focus groups after participating in a 24-week Ignatian Spiritual Exercises program. Ignatian spirituality, which is central to the Catholic, Jesuit tradition (Staral, 2003) has four dimensions: gratitude, doing good deeds, awareness of desires, and ministering to people where they are (Gumz, Wall, and Grossman, 2003). Gratitude moves people to respond generously to others. Love is demonstrated through good deeds. Core values are discovered through awareness of our deepest desires. Spiritual growth can happen through developing deeper understandings of internal conflicts. The goal of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is to “act out of promptings of God’s spirit . . . to act ultimately out of love” (Gumz, Wall, and Grossman, p. 147). Participants expressed a feeling of centeredness in their personal and professional lives and more openness to exploring spiritual issues with their clients. Ignatian spirituality was also used in the context of a social work ethics class as a method
of reflection on ethical decision-making (Staral). Students better understood how spirituality could be a personal support throughout their careers in social work.

A recent theoretical piece on social work as praxis makes some clear applications of this concept to social work (Singletary, 2005). Based on the ideas of liberation theology, praxis “emphasizes a thoughtful reflection upon human action and may provide a useful notion for understanding professional activities in social work” (Singletary, p. 56). Social work practitioners who are spiritually aware may benefit from engaging in their professional practice in a more reflective way that is based on a “faith in action” model; this reflection should then improve our social work practice. According to this praxis model, “faith informs practice and practice informs faith” (Singletary, p. 57); it involves taking the time to stop and reflect on the meaning of our work, to practice social work with theoretical and theological reflection, and to utilize the professional dimensions of our lives in a spiritual formation process. We are challenged and changed as we engage clients through the practice of social work. While this specific discussion of a praxis model was written for Christian social workers, “as a result of the fluidity of the meaning and usage of praxis, other models may be developed and may be of value for other social workers in other settings” (Singletary, p. 63). This also serves as an example of cross-disciplinary consideration of the role of spirituality in social work.

Miller (2005) found, through his interviews with “passionately committed psychotherapists,” a spirituality-related theme that points to practitioner spirituality as a strong motivating factor. In this study, “passionately committed psychotherapists” are defined as “those who maintain an enthusiasm for their work regardless of time in the job, and for whom work produces more energy than it demands” (Miller, p. 8). Among
several other themes, the theme of *transcendence* emerged in the analysis.

Transcendence is described here as a recognition of the spiritual nature of psychotherapy; and locating the significance of psychotherapy within communal and social responsibility. “Although themes of the spiritual nature of psychotherapy and the significance of this role were prominent in the interview data, none of the subjects discussed this in such frankly religious terms as would be connoted by the term ‘transcendence’” (Miller, p. 68).

**Assessment and Intervention**

The literature related to the use of spirituality in assessment and intervention in social work practice is beginning to expand (Cascio, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Hodge, 2003, 2005a; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; Mattison, Jayaratne, & Croxton, 2000; Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, 2007; Sheridan, 2004). In fact, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), the largest health care accrediting body in the U.S., now requires that practitioners administer a spiritual assessment in working with patients (Hodge, 2006b). The social work literature generally refers to nonreligious spiritual practices, such as those found in alternative religious belief systems, mysticism, and new age trends as appropriate for practice (Cascio, 1998; Praglin, 2004). In a national study of social work practitioners (n=1,278), Mattison, Jayaratne, and Croxton (2000) found that praying with clients and the laying on of hands were considered inappropriate techniques for use in social work practice. Gilbert’s (2000) qualitative focus group study findings emphasized further need for spiritual assessment tools, practitioner self-awareness, recognition of spiritual resources and respect for spiritual diversity, and collaboration with clergy.
Hodge (2005a) offers practitioners a “spiritual assessment toolbox” (p. 1) for differential use with clients: spiritual histories, spiritual lifemaps, spiritual genograms, spiritual ecomaps, and spiritual ecograms. Spiritual histories are done orally and are probably the most common assessment approach. Similar to taking a family history, the focus is on helping clients tell their spiritual stories from childhood to the present. This assessment tool works best with clients who are verbally oriented.

Spiritual lifemaps are “a pictorial delineation of a client’s spiritual journey” or a “map of their spiritual life” (Hodge, 2005a, Spiritual lifemaps section, para. 1). A spiritual lifemap is chronological and depicted on a single line symbolizing the road of life; it should be a creative endeavor for clients as they choose “symbols, cut out pictures, and other material” to “mark key events along the journey” (Spiritual lifemaps section, para. 3).

Spiritual genograms are modified family trees that depict spirituality across three generations. The spiritual genogram should designate “individuals who have played major spiritual roles,” “indicate clients’ spiritual tradition,” and “changes in orientation from one’s family of origin” (Hodge, 2005a, Spiritual genograms section, para. 2). As with a genogram used in family assessment, spiritual genograms should also depict spiritual bonds between family members. Spiritual genograms are time-consuming to produce.

Spiritual ecomaps focus on the current spiritual relationships of clients: relationships “with God or transcendence, rituals, faith communities, and transpersonal encounters” (Hodge, 2005a, Spiritual ecomaps section, para. 3). An ecomap also depicts
relationships between the family system and the spiritual systems, indicating their strength. Spiritual ecomaps are easy to construct, easy to grasp, and focus on the present.

Spiritual ecograms depict information both from the present and across time, and the connections between past and present functioning (Hodge, 2005a). Pictorially, a spiritual ecogram is a combination of an ecomap and a genogram, with linkages between the two levels of information. Because spiritual ecograms are more labor intensive to create, they may only be useful in particular client situations, such as when the family system plays an important role. In summary, social work practitioners have access to spiritual assessment tools that have been either adapted or developed for use in social work practice, a good first step towards best practice guidelines related to spirituality.

Sheridan (2004) utilized a cross-sectional survey design to explore the use of spiritually-derived interventions among 204 licensed clinical social work practitioners in a mid-Atlantic state. At the outset, spirituality was defined as “the search of meaning, purpose, and connection with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality, however one understands it, which may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions” (p.10). Religion was defined as “an organized structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality” (p. 10). The questionnaire included demographic information, the Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice (RRSP) scale, and the Spiritually-Derived Interventions Checklist (SDIC). Respondents reported giving considerable attention to religious or spiritual factors in assessment and intervention and utilizing a wide range of spiritually-derived practices. This study highlights the need for best practice guidelines related to spiritually-derived interventions. There is little social work literature on the outcomes of these interventions,
despite the profession’s attempts to promote evidence-based practice. As Sheridan (2004) reminds us, much of the literature on using spirituality in practice is focused on practitioners’ reports of their practice behaviors rather than their actual practice behaviors.

Some evidence for the use of spiritually-based interventions can be gleaned from research conducted related to meditation, intercessory prayer, spiritually-modified cognitive therapy, and forgiveness education (Barker, 2005; Hodge, 2006a, 2007). These are but a few examples of the many spiritually-based interventions being used in practice. Other examples include, but are not limited to: use of spiritual books or writings, use of spiritual language or concepts, helping clients clarify their spiritual values, recommending participation in a spiritual program, referring clients to clergy or other spiritual counselors, and helping clients develop rituals (Gilligan & Furness, 2006). Glicken (2005) summarizes a number of studies that suggest spirituality and religious involvement may have a positive influence on mental and physical health. Ellison and Levin (1998, as cited in Glicken) suggest three reasons why spirituality and religious involvement are beneficial: health-related risks such as tobacco and alcohol use and risky sexual behavior are prohibited in some religious traditions; social support is strong among people who are religiously affiliated; and people who are spiritual grasp coherence about the meaning and purpose of life and this is a buffer against the stress associated with physical and mental health difficulties.

Spirituality and Professional Social Work Education

Recent research findings indicate the quantity and content of courses in spirituality in MSW programs nationwide (Miller, 2001; Russel, 1998; Russel, Ferraro, &
Russo, 2005); this literature also reveals various conceptualizations of spirituality and a broad range of content that is currently in use. One published study focused specifically on curriculum development around spirituality and religion. Russel (1998) surveyed 118 MSW program directors from accredited programs in 1995. At that time, 17 programs were offering graduate courses on spirituality and/or religion. Most of these courses were developed recently; another 15 schools were hoping to develop courses. A content analysis of course syllabi revealed a wide range of topics covered, reading materials used, assignments given, and teaching modalities.

Russel, Ferraro, & Russo (2005) conducted a follow-up survey to explore the quantity and elements of courses on spirituality or religion. One hundred seventy-one MSW programs that were accredited or in candidacy status were asked in the summer of 2004 to answer some questions about the number and nature of their courses in spirituality and/or religion, and to provide syllabi of said courses. Fifty-seven programs were found to offer a course with a spiritual or religious focus; seven more were hoping to develop a course. Content analysis on 33 syllabi revealed a wide range of topics covered, reading material utilized, and assignments given. Curriculum development in the area of spirituality and religion is still in its infancy, and the current research only examines graduates programs with discrete courses, leaving out undergraduate programs and the infusion of religion and spirituality content throughout other courses. Scales, Wolfer, Sherwood, Garland, Hugen, & Pittman (2002) provide a specific curricular resource to aid social work educators in helping students begin to work with religious and spiritual issues as they arise in practice. This resource was published by CSWE.
Issues and Challenges Related to Spirituality and Social Work

There is a growing body of literature addressing the potential value conflicts and ethical concerns that are generated in a discussion of spirituality and social work from a political and faith-based social service support framework (Cnaan, 1999) and from an ethical conflict perspective (Canda, Mitsuko, & Furman, 2004; Hodge, 2005b).

Acknowledging the overlap in our current conceptualizations of the terms *spirituality* and *religion*, it is important to address the impact that our current political landscape has on any dialogue about the role of spirituality in social work. The First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution stipulates that organized religion should not interfere with the role of government and conversely, the government should not interfere with the role of organized religion in society. Understanding the religiously oppressive context from which our nation’s first immigrants fled, this ideology is reasonable. Cnaan (1999) argues, however, that this separation of church and state ideology to which we, both as a society and as a profession, cling to is not so easily discernable when we consider the provision of social welfare in the United States and the recent trend towards the privatization of many services under the auspices of faith-based organizations. The social work profession must, if you will, find ways to converse and collaborate. The separation of church and state were issues of concern for faculty expressing their views about spirituality content in social work education programs (Dudley and Helfgott, 1990; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994).

In a mixed methods survey of National Association of Social Workers members nationwide (n=2,069), Canda, Mitsuko, and Furman (2004) examined practitioners’ ethical concerns regarding spiritual issues in clinical practice settings. Findings from the
qualitative portion of the study indicated that a majority of practitioners who responded to the open-ended questions “supported the inclusion of religious and spiritual content in social work education” (p. 29), stating that social workers have an ethical responsibility to practice competently with diverse clients. Qualitative findings also demonstrated a strong positive view among respondents towards the use of spiritual assessment in practice, but mixed views about the use of a number of spiritually-oriented interventions, including making clergy referrals, using prayer and/or meditation, using rituals and symbols, using inspirational readings, touching clients for helping purposes, using spiritual narrative and dialogue, recommending spiritual activities, and using religious language; “support was situational, but not unequivocal” (Canda, Mitsuko, and Furman, p. 31).

Respondents were also concerned that practitioners adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics when addressing spirituality in practice, and commented on the importance of practitioner self-awareness (Canda, Mitsuko, and Furman, 2004). The researchers concluded that “more research is needed on the ways that practitioners make ethical decisions for addressing spirituality in practice” (p. 34) and suggest the use of naturalistic methods to explore in depth how practitioners confront these ethical dilemmas.

From an alternative ethical perspective, Hodge (2005b) telephone surveyed a state-stratified random sample of NASW-affiliated graduate students (n=303) on their perceptions of the profession’s compliance with the ethical standards that address religion listed in the NASW (1999) Code of Ethics. The results suggested that, as a group, the respondents felt the profession was doing a good job complying with the Code of Ethics mandates concerning religion; this was independent of demographic variables such as
age, gender, marital status, and religious affiliation. These findings “suggest that the profession is headed in the proper direction as it wrestles with expanding the scope of diversity to incorporate religion” (Hodge, p. 291).

**Literature from Related Professions**

An initial review of the literature from other professional fields, such as medicine and nursing, indicates that the integration of spirituality and practice is being explored there as well. In Koenig’s (2001) book alone, there are more than 1,200 studies presented on the general topic of religion, faith, and spirituality in mental and physical health. There is agreement here, too, that the conceptualization of spirituality remains varied while research utilizing different instruments aimed at measuring spirituality continues to proliferate in the medical and nursing literature. Interestingly, King (2004) asserts that, despite this trend, studies related to spirituality and medicine are not supported as strongly by most of the major funding agencies, nor are such studies printed in the major medical journals.

As in the social work profession, the health care field is mandated to address patient spiritual needs by its governing bodies: the Joint Commission on Accreditation for Health Care Organizations (JCAHO) and the Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). Both require health care professionals to “conduct spiritual assessments and make arrangements for meeting a patient’s spiritual needs” (Galek, Flannelly, Vane, & Galek, 2005). As in the social work profession, there is also some debate in the health care field about the appropriate place of spirituality in patient care (Curlin, Roach, Gorawara-Bhat, Lantos, & Chin, 2005).
One commonality among medical and nursing conceptualizations of spirituality is the agreement that spirituality is multidimensional (Tanyi, 2002). The following elements of spirituality are included by the majority of these authors: transcendence, mystery, connectedness, meaning and purpose in life, higher power, and relationships (Chui, Emblen, Hofwegen, Sawatzky, & Meyerhoff, 2004; Dyson, Cobb, & Forman, 1997; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000; Tanyi, 2002).

Tanyi (2002) also points out that the terms “spirituality” and “religion” are often used interchangeably in the nursing literature. Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, and Zinnbauer (2000) emphasize that the use of religion and spirituality as separate terms is a recent phenomenon. They also warn against the potential to label religion as “bad” and spirituality as “good.” Rather, researchers should be aware that nearly all religions are interested in spiritual matters, and most forms of both religious and spiritual expression occur in a social context. Curlin, Roach, Gorawara-Bhat, Lantos, & Chin (2005) interviewed doctors about their perspectives toward religion and spirituality and health outcomes; despite not providing explicit definitions for each concept, doctors almost always referred “to beliefs and practices related to particular religious communities and religious traditions” when using the term spirituality. Interestingly, nursing takes the perspective that spiritual awareness, growth, and transformation in patients leads to “peaceful resolutions” despite “devastating life experiences” (Tanyi, 2002, p. 507) and thus is an important goal in holistic nursing care. The role of spirituality in coping with disease, illness, suffering, and loss (Curlin, Roach,
emphasizes the “meaning-making” dimension of spirituality.

Miller & Thoreson (2003) emphasize the fact that most research to date related to spirituality and health has really measured religious rather than spiritual variables. It seems appropriate to conclude, then, that while spirituality as a concept in health research is beginning to expand, it is very difficult to operationalize spirituality. There is also little evidence in the health care literature that the spirituality of the practitioner has received attention with the exception of two nursing articles (Boero, Caviglia, Monteverdi, Braida, Fabello, & Zorzella, 2005; McLaren, 2004).

Including spirituality in nursing can improve the relationship with patients, as nurses’ spirituality may become the unspoken element which underpins and may improve quality of care; in fact the discussion of spiritual care may stimulate an examination of the underlying values of service. (Boero, Caviglia, Monteverdi, Braida, Fabello, & Zorzella, 2005)

Framework for Study

I have utilized a grounded theory framework for this study. Staying true to the philosophical assumptions of qualitative research and “ways of knowing,” I will not offer any particular theory or conceptual framework at the outset of this study. Using the words of the practitioners who will be interviewed for this study and the meanings they make of their experiences, I will analyze the data for emergent themes. This framework recognizes that the expertise is located within the participants. While understanding what has come before, I will not offer a fixed position or hypothesis. The current theory and conceptual frameworks that are presented in the literature described above certainly
impact the approach of this study and every attempt will be made to bracket any of my assumptions about what spirituality is and how it is used. Rather than trying to fit the data to the pre-existing frameworks, I will examine the data for what it is, with the opportunity to compare findings.

There are two major ways in which this study will contribute to the knowledge base. First, while many of the previous studies that have served as building blocks for this research agenda have used survey methods, this study will explore practitioners’ conceptualization of spirituality using in-depth interviews. In a way, it’s returning back to where we started twenty years ago when the first studies on spirituality and social work, which were qualitative in nature, appeared on the scene. Despite two decades of research on this topic, we continue to struggle with the conceptualization issue; what do we really mean by spirituality, anyway? Solid research begins with solid concepts. Secondly, this study will include a focus on the spirituality of the social work practitioner as a potentially important factor in understanding how spirituality is integrated into the practice context, a neglected area of focus in the current literature.
Chapter 3: Method

Methodology for this study reflects the qualitative philosophy of sampling, data collection, and data analysis. More specifically, I employ the use of grounded theory techniques in an attempt to not only identify themes as they emerge from the data, but to look for relationships between the themes and build a conceptual framework that begins to offer a theory of how social work practitioners understand and experience spirituality in the practice context.

A grounded theory methodology seems warranted, considering the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of spirituality and the complexity of measurement without a clear concept. If there is a “common” understanding of spirituality among social work practitioners, then it can be discovered through a narrative approach that views participants as experts and develops theory from lived experiences.

This chapter describes how I selected a sample of social work practitioners for the study, how I collected the qualitative data through a semi-structured interview protocol, and how I coded and analyzed the data using a grounded theory methodology.

Sampling

Participants

Because I am interested in exploring potential nuances of spirituality as it applies to the social work profession, participants in this study were social work practitioners, defined as people who have a social work degree and are currently employed in a social service setting serving clients at the micro, mezzo, or macro levels. Sampling was purposive in nature and largely confined to social work practitioners in the Greater
Boston, Massachusetts area for feasibility and convenience, recognizing that this further limits the study’s representativeness.

Because spirituality is a complex phenomenon with many dimensions and because samples in qualitative studies are relatively small, participants were as similar to each other as possible. Participants were social work practitioners with an MSW degree and at least 3 years of post-MSW experience. The literature related to spiritual development (Fowler, 1981; Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004) indicates that age, education level, and personal experiences (particularly crises) contribute to a person’s ability to think about and process spirituality at a higher level. Therefore, the sample will be divided by age categories: under age 40 and 40 or older.

I anticipated the likelihood of finding participants in practice fields where you might expect that spirituality is recognized more commonly; the literature demonstrates higher levels of spirituality use in fields such as aging, addictions, hospice, and palliative care settings (Andrews & Marotta, 2005, Frame, Uphold, Shehan, & Reid, 2005; Galek, Flannelly, & Galek, 2005; Jackson, Paul, & Cook, 2005; Koenig, 2006; Neff & MacMaster, 2005). Practitioners in these types of environments are more likely to have had specific experiences to share and to have given some thought to spirituality and what it means in their personal and professional lives. Sampling was not limited, though, to these particular domains.

Finally, participants self-reported that they have formulated ways of thinking about and practicing spirituality in their work, either successfully or unsuccessfully, with ambivalence and/or tension. In other words, the concept of spirituality and its experience in practice resonated with participants.
The sample was purposively varied in terms of religious and nonreligious affiliation, in hopes of developing a conceptualization of spirituality that is not just reflective of spirituality within a religious understanding and context. This differentiation between religion and spirituality is one that is frequently debated in the professional literature (Miller & Thoreson, 2003; Tanyi, 2002; Hill et. al., 2000), and much of the empirical literature aimed at studying spirituality really uses variables that measure religiosity. Therefore, sampling participants by age and by religious affiliation allows for consideration of any differences that might be due to generational and developmental factors.

Recruitment

Recruitment of participants began with two or three practitioners who I already knew in the field; I have made several community connections through my previous role as the Field Practicum Coordinator for the Department of Social Work at my home institution. From there, I utilized a purposive snowball sampling technique in which I asked participants to give me the names of others who they thought would be interested in participating in this study. I planned to supplement the snowball sample by recruiting participants through the use of fliers placed in agencies where I thought there might be high numbers of people who fit the inclusion criteria. The flier (see Appendix A) contained a short statement describing the study, the general inclusion criteria, and my number for people to call for more information about the study. In this way, potential participants could be identified in three ways: by me, by other participants, and self-identified in response to a flier. An adequate number of participants (n=20) was located without the use of the flier.
I contacted potential participants via telephone and screened them prior to their entry into the study using a short inclusion questionnaire (see Appendix B). Respondents were excluded from the study if:

- They do not have a Masters degree in social work.
- They do not have at least 3 years of post-MSW experience.
- They weren’t able to self-report that they have formulated ways of thinking about and practicing spirituality in their work.
- They fulfilled a religious/nonreligious and age group category that already had enough participants. I needed 5 or 6 religious, younger participants, 5 or 6 older, religious participants, 5 or 6 younger, nonreligious participants, and 5 or 6 older, nonreligious participants.

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Once a participant was entered into the study, he or she scheduled a time to meet with me for the interview. At the time of the scheduled meeting, but before the interview was conducted, I reviewed the informed consent document (see Appendix C) with the participant, answered any questions the participant had, and obtained written informed consent. Participants signed two copies of the consent form; I collected one and let them keep the other for their records. Then, participants were asked a series of questions that served as their demographic profiles (see Appendix D).

**Sample Size**

The size of the sample depended on how soon I seemed to have reached the saturation point; that is, when no new themes emerged after several interviews had been
analyzed. Also, theoretical sampling, or sampling on the basis of emerging concepts and by varying the situations to maximize differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 81-82) may impact who is selected to participate in the study. At a minimum, I guessed at the outset that I would need to conduct at least 15 interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with participants. I followed a semi-structured interview schedule made up of questions that attempt to get at and answer my research questions. See Appendix E for the semi-structured interview protocol.

The interview questions were developed in a brainstorming session during which I listed any and all questions that came to mind that might help answer the research questions. The list of questions was then reviewed by Jerry Floersch, Ph.D., who made suggestions for additional questions and suggestions for deletions. The revised list of questions was then given to three colleagues who were asked whether or not the questions resonated with them as social work practitioners. The interview protocol was piloted on one practitioner who participated in a practice interview and offered feedback following the interview.

As grounded theory methodology suggests, the way in which the interview questions were asked was likely to change over the course of the study, as themes began to emerge and I began to focus my questions around validating/not validating what had been discovered in previous interviews. The interview should be a “directed conversation,” a balance between eliciting a participant’s lived experience of spirituality
and practice without cutting off “the most interesting leads and rich data” (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1167). However, no changes to the content of the interview protocol were necessary over the course of the study.

Each interview was audiotaped and then fully transcribed before analysis of that interview began. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. To respect the privacy of participants, the interviews were conducted in a location that was mutually acceptable to both me and the participant; sometimes it was in the participant’s place of employment or home, my office or home, or a neutral place.

Data Analysis

As grounded theory methods suggest, data analysis began immediately after the first interview was conducted. Figure 1 is a visual representation of my data analytic strategy. Data analysis consisted of coding at various levels, which is essentially about conceptualizing, reducing, elaborating, and relating the emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Data analysis began as a thematic content analysis (conceptual ordering) using the interview transcripts of each individual participant. Conceptual ordering is “the organization of data into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions and then using descriptions to elucidate those categories” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 19) This could be the desired research end point for some investigations, but is also the precursor to theorizing.

Data analysis was conducted using open, axial, and selective coding procedures based on transcripts of interviews focusing on the study’s research questions. Research question one asks what is similar and different in the way social workers make sense of the idea of spirituality? I asked participants to talk about their definitions and
descriptions of spirituality. In open coding, I looked for themes across the interviews that are both similar and different. Research question two asks how do social work practitioners make sense of the fit between spirituality and professional social work? The fit between spirituality and their particular agency contexts? In open coding, I searched the transcripts for themes related to compatibility and barriers within the professional and agency context. Research question three asked what do social work practitioners say
about the use of spirituality concepts in their practice contexts, such as assessment and intervention, talk with other practitioners, or self-care? I asked participants to provide examples of how spirituality has applied or not applied in practice, and then analyzed the transcripts for themes. The types of interview questions asked varied to elicit informational, reflective, and feeling-oriented data (Charmaz, 1990).

The process of microanalysis, which is a line-by-line analysis done at the beginning of data analysis, generated initial categories that were labeled using the exact words of the respondents (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). After the first interview was completed and transcribed, I began data analysis at the in-vivo coding level—line by line, I went through the interview and highlighted small sections of the narrative that I thought were salient. These quotations were labeled using the exact words of the respondent. For example, in response to a question about how respondents understand and define spirituality, an older, non-religious male participant said, “so I think I find spirituality not in the church or the synagogue, but in nature and the woods, under water, in the rain.” This was coded as “I find spirituality in nature.” In response to a question about using spirituality in the practice context, a younger, non-religious female said, “The other thing I use fairly consistently is the Buddhist book called Peace is Every Step.” This was coded “I use the Buddhist book Peace is Every Step.” I did this for a total of five interviews, which were not necessarily done chronologically due to transcripts being finished out of order. This process resulted in 292 in-vivo codes.

After this initial in-vivo coding of five interviews, I developed some specific codes that came from the research questions (see Appendix F). I then took my in-vivo codes and renamed them using the newly developed coding strategy. For example, the
in-vivo code “I find spirituality in nature” became “nature” and the in-vivo code “I use the Buddhist book Peace is Every Step” became “clients_interventions/ readings. I proceeded to code three more interviews using the strategy, resulting in 429 codes. These eight interviews represented two participants in each age/religiosity cell.

Coding was done using the constant comparative method. Comparisons are done at two levels: interview with interview, compared to each other at the property or dimensional level; and theoretical comparisons, a listing of properties for a concept that we do not understand or does not fit (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 81-82). I also attempted to verify the trustworthiness of the codes by asking an independent reviewer to read and code, using my initial coding strategy, the first eight transcripts that I initially coded and determined whether or not the independent reviewer agreed that a certain passage reflects the code I gave it. This process also allowed me to add additional quotations and/or codes that were selected by the independent reviewer but were missed initially. This process resulted in 448 codes.

A master codebook, based on the analysis of an initial eight interviews, was created (Appendix G). The creation of the master codebook involved reducing the 448 open codes into higher-level codes centered around the study’s research questions, as well as additional concepts that emerged. This process resulted in 136 codes, which were then used to code the remaining 12 interviews. At this point, new codes were added only if an important quotation did not fit into one of the codebook categories. Each interview was also coded by salient demographic labels. These included sex (!male or !female), religiosity (!religious or !not religious), and age (!older or !younger).
Once initial categories were developed, I proceeded with an axial coding process; “data are put together in new ways . . . using a ‘coding paradigm’ that seeks to identify causal relationships between categories” (Barker, Jones, & Britton, n.d, Data acquisition section, para 3). The emergent categories that result from open coding were then reassembled in a way that begins to hypothesize about what the relationships between the categories might be.

In the selective coding process, the core category were selected and identified and then systematically related to other categories. Selective coding “involves validating those relationships, filling in, and refining and developing those categories” (Barker, Jones, & Britton, n.d., Data acquisition section, para 4). Here, the story about how practitioners make sense of spirituality is explicated and grounded in the data. In essence, the data analysis process consisted of reducing the twenty narrative transcripts to shorter quotations, assigning codes to each quotation, and then grouping the codes into thematic categories reflective of the study’s research questions.

Validity in research has positivistic connotations and cannot be assessed in the same manner in qualitative methodology. Strauss and Corbin (1998), rather, discuss validity in terms of "criteria for evaluation" of a grounded theory, criteria that are “meant to address the adequacy of the research process and the grounding of its findings” (p. 265). They list eight criteria, or guidelines, through which a grounded theory should be assessed:

1) Are concepts generated?

2) Are the concepts systematically related?

3) Are there many conceptual linkages, and are the categories well developed?
4) Is variation built into the theory?

5) Are the conditions under which variation can be found built into the study and explained?

6) Has process been taken into account?

7) Do the theoretical findings seem significant, and to what extent?

8) Does theory stand the test of time?

“These criteria become both the map for the development of the theory in this study and the gold-standard by which the resulting theory will be assessed” (Miller, 2005, p. 49).

Theory denotes “a set of well-developed categories (e.g., themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationships to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing, or other phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 22); in this case, spirituality and its use in the social work practice context. Theory building is the ultimate goal in grounded theory methodology, so in this study, I attempted to relate the themes to each other. Mini-frameworks and/or conceptual diagrams are used to show relationships between concepts as they emerge. I utilized the ATLAS-TI software program to assist in organizing the data around themes and in displaying the relationships between themes in visual diagrams.

Unlike quantitative methodology, which espouses objectivity of the researcher, qualitative methods recognize that researcher values, understanding, thoughts, and opinions very much impact the research process. Qualitative methodologists need to find ways to track their thinking and then reflect on that as part of data analysis. Keeping a journal of the research experience is a useful way in which to keep track of what the
researcher is thinking during data gathering and analysis, and was utilized in this study. I also used the process of memoing, which is the researcher’s record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110). The possibility of re-contacting participants to inform them of a follow-up study, should data analysis suggest one, was included in the consent document (see Appendix C).

Protection of Human Subjects

This research project involved adult human subjects. An assessment of risks and benefits related to this study was necessary for ethical research; the term “risk” refers to psychological or physical injury, social, legal, and financial harm (Dunn & Chadwick, 1999). There were no foreseeable risks to participants in this research. This research project did not involve the use of deception, drugs or devices, covert observation, special participant populations, induction of mental and/or physical stress, procedures that may cause physical harm to the participant, issues commonly regarded as socially unacceptable, or procedures that might be regarded as an invasion of privacy. There were no direct benefits to participants except furthering our knowledge in the area of spirituality and social work could have implications for improved education and practice.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to conducting the interview. I reviewed the informed consent document (see Appendix C) outlining the procedures, risks and benefits, compensation, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the study with each participant at the start of our scheduled meeting, answered any questions, and secured participant signatures before beginning the interview.
In order to protect participant privacy to the greatest extent possible, interviews were conducted in a location that was mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher. Each interview was audiotaped and then transcribed. The audiotapes and transcriptions are held in a locked file cabinet in my office; access to the locked cabinet will only be available to me. Copies of the audiotapes and the original signed consent forms are located in the office of the Principal Investigator. While the participants are potentially identifiable by the sound of their voices or any information they provide during the interview that can be connected to them, each interview was coded by an interview number, rather than by the participant’s name. I keep a master list that matches interview number with participant information in the locked file cabinet. Others who, at times, had access to the data are those who helped me transcribe the interviews and those who participated in the inter-rater reliability checks. All materials will be destroyed three years after the last publication of findings.
Chapter 4: Demographic Results Summary and Research Question One

I have explored how social work practitioners understand the concept of spirituality and how they experience spirituality in the practice context. Consistent with grounded theory methodology in qualitative research, I audiotaped, transcribed, coded, analyzed, and organized interviews with social work practitioners into thematic categories. I then integrated these categories into a higher level theory, grounded in the data, which begins to explain how social work practitioners understand and utilize spirituality.

In this chapter, I will demographically describe the social work practitioners who participated in these interviews, and identify and describe the emergent themes as they relate to the first research question: how social work practitioners define spirituality.

Demographic Description of Participants

Social work practitioners were identified either by me or through a snowball sampling technique whereby participants were asked to give me the names of others who they thought might be interested in participating in a study on this topic. I recruited practitioners primarily from the Greater Boston area due to convenience and feasibility. A total of 24 practitioners were identified: two potential participants were not entered into the study because they did not meet the inclusion criteria; of these, one did not have at least three years of post-MSW experience and one fit into an age/religiosity profile that already had enough participants. A third did not participate because of worries about being audiotaped and a fourth declined participation because of lack of time. Thus I recruited a total of 20 practitioners for the study.
Fifteen of the participants are female and five are male. The age of participants ranges from 27 to 69 years; nine are under age 40, and 11 are age 40 or older. The average age of the participants is 46 years. The number of years of post-MSW experience ranges from 4 to 28 years. The average number of years of post-MSW experience is 15.6 years. Thirteen participants identify themselves as White; four identify themselves as African-American; one identifies as Latino, one identifies as Middle-Eastern; and one identifies as African.

Nineteen participants say that they were affiliated with a particular religious tradition: six are affiliated with Judaism; 10 with Protestantism, including non-denominational (n=6), Episcopal (n=2), Church of Christ (n=1) and Nazarene (n=1); two with Catholicism; and one with Islam. According to my criteria, level of attendance at a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque, 11 are considered to be religious and nine are considered to be nonreligious.

Thirteen participants say that they were not exposed to the topic of spirituality through their social work education; six say the topic of spirituality was integrated in several different courses; and one says the topic was “not formally” part of the education process but there was “some exposure.” Of the 20 participants, three also have a BSW; one completed an advanced standing program, and one also completed a Ph.D.

Four participants are involved in private clinical practice; three work in an outpatient hospital setting; three work in nursing homes; two provide psychotherapy in an agency-based setting; two work in public schools, two work in Head Start programs, two are involved in higher education, one does outreach and education, and one does case management. Length of tenure at these current practice settings ranges from .5 years to
28 years. The average length of tenure in the current practice setting is 5.2 years. Five of the settings are sectarian and 15 are non-sectarian. Table 1 is a summary of participant demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Demographic Description of Participants (N=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (n=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Range: 27 to 69  Mean: 46  Std Dev: 12.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-MSW experience</td>
<td>Range: 4 to 28  Mean: 15.6  Std Dev: 7.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White (n=13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latino (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Eastern (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Affiliation</td>
<td>Judaism (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protestantism (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholicism (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Islam (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considered religious</td>
<td>Yes (n=11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (n=9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposed to topic of spirituality through social work education</td>
<td>Not at all (n=13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separate course (n=0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Informal” exposure (n=1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice setting</td>
<td>Private clinical practice (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outpatient hospital (n=3)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nursing homes (n=3)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency-based psychotherapy (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public school (n=2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Head Start (n=2)</td>
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<td>Higher education (n=2)</td>
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<td>Outreach and education (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case management (n=1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of tenure at setting (in years)</td>
<td>Range: .5 to 28  Mean: 5.2  Std Dev: 6.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting auspices</td>
<td>Sectarian (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-sectarian (n=15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is Spirituality?

In this chapter, I explore what might be similar and different in the way social workers make sense of the idea of spirituality. More specifically, I wonder what is similar and different in the way older and younger social workers who are religious and non-religious make sense of the idea of spirituality. Twenty-four themes (linked to 267 quotations) represent how these social work practitioners understand and define spirituality; when some of the 24 themes are combined into higher-level codes, 10 categories emerge. Figure 2 is a visual representation of my data analytic strategy for the first research question.

Spirituality is Difficult to Define

Respondents recognize the inherent difficulty of conceptualizing spirituality and express some difficulty in coming up with words to describe their understandings. This is true for both younger and older, religious and nonreligious participants. I am easily able to group these responses together, as participants themselves use language that is clear and straightforward. For example, a female respondent who is 32 years old and nonreligious says, after a pause in the interview, “I’m having trouble conjuring up how I would define spirituality.” Another female, age 38 and religious, says, “Truthfully, I don’t like that word . . . I think that spirituality is kind of vague . . . it is easier, I think, to describe a Christian.” A male who is 49 years old and religious says, “Spirituality, of course, is very hard to define,” as if a given. A 38 year old religious female says, “I mean it has so many different meanings so, you know, I think I have just stayed way from using that word because I cannot fully identify what it would mean for me.” Finally a female, age 42, who is religious, says, “That’s not such an easy thing to answer.”
Figure 2: Data Analytic Steps--How Social Work Practitioners Define Spirituality

**Question 1: Defining Spirituality**

**Themes combined into 10 higher-level categories**

**Examples:**
- 1. Spirituality is difficult to define
- 2. Spirituality is defined individually
- 3. Spirituality is multidimensional

**Codes grouped by 24 themes**

**Examples:**
- 1. Difficult to define
- 2. Depends on person
- 3. Communal

**Quotations assigned to codes**

**Examples:**
- 1. Trouble conjuring up definition
- 2. Looks different for different people
- 3. I think it’s a communal experience

**Narratives reduced to 267 selected quotations**

**Examples:**
- 1. “I’m having trouble conjuring up how I would define spirituality.”
- 2. “Spirituality can look very different among different people.”
- 3. “I think it’s a communal experience, often times, or at least for me that’s what works best.”

**Social worker narratives on spirituality (N=20)**
The difficulty in defining spirituality expresses itself when respondents are asked to give abstract definitions of spirituality, such as: “When you hear the word spirituality, what does it mean to you?” When asked the question differently, as in “Think of someone who you would consider spiritual; how would you describe this person?” respondents are able to conceptualize spirituality in various ways.

The idea that spirituality is a broad and vague concept reflects one of the core struggles we are faced with in social work research and practice; while spirituality is a concept we acknowledge as “real” and may utilize the term on a regular basis, it is also a concept that is not easily defined. In fact, I was motivated to do this study in part by my reading of the literature in social work and in other professions which left me concerned that we might be moving too quickly into the application of spirituality to social work practice without putting more effort into really exploring how practitioners assign meaning to the term. Simply asking practitioners to define spirituality in an open-ended fashion helps me with this exploration. The fact that a group of self-selecting practitioners who are admittedly conscious about spirituality have some difficulty defining the term emphasizes the need for continued clarity in how the term spirituality is used in the social work profession. For example, we cannot assume that social workers have adequate language to define spirituality. Much like we provide language for other concepts important to social work, such as social justice or diversity, the profession should provide comprehensive language about what spirituality is that is useful for preparing effective social work practitioners.
Religion Plays a Role in Defining Spirituality

Respondents clearly grasp the importance of considering the term religion when thinking about spirituality, particularly in a U. S. context. While I purposely selected the term spirituality for use in this study, respondents introduced the term religion as part of our conversation. How respondents further define and describe what spirituality is to them is impacted by the social context in which they live and work. Two particular aspects of the role of religion in understanding what spirituality is emerged from the data: while 1) religion is not the same thing as spirituality, 2) religion and spirituality are often connected.

For example, a male respondent who is 50 years old and nonreligious says, “Religion or spirituality, again, those are two different words there . . . spirituality for me is really a more personal thing.” A 32 year old nonreligious female says, “I do think that religion is the textbook and spirituality is the practice.” A female who is 36 years old and nonreligious specifically mentions the U. S. context. She says, “I think we, in the United States, tend to define spirituality by religion, but I think they’re different. I think they can be combined but they may not be for people.” Other respondents also reflect the way they see spirituality and religion as connected. A 27 year old religious female says, “I think spirituality stems from religion, because religion has a huge impact on motivating what we do.” A male who is 36 years old and religious says, “I also think that people can be spiritual without being religious just as people can be religious without being spiritual.” A 42 year old female who is religious offers the following insight: “Maybe religion is a tool toward spirituality.”
The idea that religion and spirituality are two different concepts supports the trend in social work to clearly differentiate spirituality from religion and suggests that we should be careful to not use the terms interchangeably; religion and spirituality are not synonymous (Derezotes & Evans, 1995; Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999). Within our social context, however, spirituality and religion are very much connected; thus respondents attempt to acknowledge the differences in what the terms mean while reconciling the overlap. This is true for both older and younger, religious and nonreligious participants.

The idea that religion plays a role in defining spirituality also suggests a hierarchical relationship. Spirituality is understood as the broader concept, encompassing religion, and spirituality is a concept that many people can identify with even if they can’t identify with religion. The literature supports this idea that spirituality supercedes religion from a conceptual perspective (Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999; Hodge, 2000). Religious respondents are more likely than nonreligious respondents to emphasize how participation in organized religion is helpful in enhancing spirituality. This is not surprising to me, as respondents are giving voice to their own experiences and what makes sense for them. The fact that participants included a discussion of the term religion in our conversation about spirituality suggests that religion and the concepts related to it must also be given attention within the social work profession in terms of defining religion, understanding religious diversity, and utilizing religion with the practice context (Derezotes & Evans, 1995).

The Nature of Spirituality

In their discussions about what spirituality is, participants offer insight into the
nature of spirituality. Is it something everyone has? Is it part of what it means to be human? Is spirituality a developmental and evolving process? Do some people lack spirituality? As Carroll (2001) summarizes, several working models “locate” spirituality differently within human existence; for example, the Self-Other-Context-Spiritual Circle theorizes that spirituality encompasses all other human dimensions and provides direction to life while the Five Levels of Consciousness model emphasizes the connections between spirituality and the other dimensions of human existence. Central to these models, though, is the developmental aspect of spirituality (Carroll, 2001).

Spirituality is something everyone has. For example, a female respondent who is 27 years old and religious says, “I think everyone has spirituality . . . it’s what you believe, and how you function.” A 50 year old female who is nonreligious says, “I now consider myself a spiritual person, sort of . . . and that each person has a spirituality.”

Spirituality is a developmental process. For example, a female who is 36 years old and non religious says, “It’s a developmental process. And I think I’m always struck by that . . . people developmentally go through a process of their own spiritual experience wherever they are.” Another respondent, a 58 year old nonreligious female says, “I’m not saying I’m always comfortable with my own spirituality, I mean, it’s a moving target, or it’s an evolving process, whichever we want to call it.”

Finally, spirituality is something everyone can have, but it must be nurtured. A female, age 32 who is religious says, “I think that, for me, we all have the ability to be spiritual. It’s not necessarily in the same way. It’s very individual and I think it can be tapped.” Speaking from her own experience from childhood, a 32 year old nonreligious female offers this thought.
I always remember my mother saying that she and my dad had made the decision not to baptize my brother and I because they wanted us to make our own decisions when the time came. Although, that’s such a catch 22, because, if you don’t give someone any spiritual training, then what happens? Do they become not interested? That was definitely what was happening with me.

Spirituality is a universal aspect of human existence. Some people are more connected to their spirituality, perhaps because of a conscious nurturing. Spirituality, like other aspects of human behavior, is developmental. The idea of spirituality as a universal, developmental human experience is reflected by both younger and older respondents, which is consistent with a lifespan perspective; if spirituality is a developmental phenomenon, people of all ages would have some sense of it, as they do here.

The idea of spirituality as a universal, developmental human experience is also true for both religious and nonreligious respondents, although the specific means for nurturing one’s spirituality would be different for religious and nonreligious people. Spirituality as universal and developmental is consistent with a bio-psycho-social understanding of human behavior, and suggests expanding this framework to include a spiritual dimension as well. Here is a natural “place,” if you will, for introducing spirituality in the social work educational context as students are being trained for professional practice. Indeed, spirituality and its related concepts are most commonly found in the context of human behavior content, as prescribed by CSWEs (2001) educational accreditation standards.

*Spirituality is Defined Individually*

Because of the highly personal overtones of spirituality as a concept, another important aspect of defining spirituality is respondent acknowledgement that spirituality can be, and is, differently defined. While there may be some overarching and broader
aspects of spirituality that apply in a more universal manner, spirituality is recognized as individually defined. A female respondent, age 27 and religious says, “Spirituality can look very different among different people, but I think culture plays a huge part in it.” A 38 year old religious female says, “Because for different people, it means different things.” A female who is 58 years old and nonreligious says, “It’s different from client to client. And so, you would handle things differently and very individually with spirituality.” A 38 year old religious female says, “I think I’ve navigated by acknowledging that it does have very different meanings to different people, based on your beliefs, your own religious practices, and your own religious or spiritual identity.”

The same point, that spirituality varies from individual to individual, is made in each quote, yet in a slightly different way. This point is made by both older and younger respondents who are religious and nonreligious. The above examples demonstrate how professional social workers are likely to filter their ideas of what spirituality is through the lens of social work values; in this case, the framework of “starting where the client is” allows practitioners a certain level of comfort in the idea that spirituality is not understood and experienced as a “one size fits all.” How practitioners go on to talk about their use of spirituality in the practice context is consistent with the idea that spirituality is defined individually; any use of spirituality with clients is based on client preferences. This parallel will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 6.

**Spiritual People Exhibit Recognizable Characteristics**

Prompted by a question asking respondents to describe someone who they would consider to be a spiritual person, a number of descriptive characteristics emerged from these responses. Some of these same ideas emerged later as respondents were asked to
more abstractly define the term *spirituality*, yet as mentioned earlier, this task seemed to be the easier of the two. Respondents, regardless of age or religiosity, easily identified someone who they considered to be a spiritual person and then they assigned descriptive characteristics to that person. In the examples below, spirituality as a concept seems “real” to respondents; in particular, they are able to consider what spirituality “looks like” in terms of how it is manifest in others.

*He lives simply. He lives in a small little house on a hillside in Vermont, with a little cabin in the back for the summer.* (Male, age 50, nonreligious)

*It feels very grounded, very centered, and, again, very much about community service in terms of how she uses her spirituality. She certainly doesn’t dialogue about God, per se, but I would say that she is probably the most spiritual person I know.* (Female, age 32, nonreligious)

*This person is loving. When I say loving, I mean unconditional. You can tell them anything, you can show them your worst side and they won’t judge you. They like to pray, they will pray with you and they will pray for you. They are not judgmental, which is really big for me, and they’re always seeking God and trying to figure out the best way to handle things.* (Female, age 27, religious)

*This is a man who is--has a quiet dignity about him and, um, is very accepting of many things. And he asks hard questions . . . And the gentleness and authenticity of him is something that is inspiring to me.* (Male, age 53, religious)

*So my mother has to be that person that was the model in my life. I even wrote a poem about her and how I would like to pattern my life after hers. Umm, I’ve tried to do that in a lot of senses . . . Umm, my mother was a praying woman. She read her Bible. She was a faithful wife, a faithful mother, faithful worker in the church.* (Female, age 67, religious)

*And that’s, again, you know, that’s not - not to say that they are, are, that they walk on water. There’s a humanity about them and a humility about them at the same time.* (Female, age 58, nonreligious)

*I would say she’s very tolerant. Whatever you tell her, uh, she’s an older person. She’s about 76 years old, but even though, you could tell her just about anything that’s going on and she doesn’t blink.* (Female, age 42, religious)
While these descriptions of spiritual people don’t provide usable definitions of spirituality in and of themselves, they do provide a deeper insight into what spirituality is from a practical perspective: spirituality is personified. These descriptions begin to elaborate the complexity of the term while grounding its meaning in personal experiences. Spirituality is taken from an abstract concept to specific characteristics that resonate in everyday life.

*Spiritual People Exhibit Certain Behaviors*

In conjunction with descriptive characteristics of spirituality, respondents offer the idea that spirituality results in certain behaviors. This is the “doing” aspect of spirituality. People who are spiritual, they recall, or who are in touch with spirituality, act in specific ways. It is interesting to note, again, that the concept of spirituality is easier for respondents to understand and define when they can talk about spirituality in more concrete ways, as in the following examples that describe behaviors of people who they consider to be spiritual.

*My projection, or my vision of him is that he meditates for an hour everyday, he’s limber with his body because he’s been practicing yoga for years.* (Male, age 50, nonreligious)

*I think, to me, spirituality is taking those beliefs and applying them to your life and living it out . . . Based on your belief you are going to respond (to situations) in a certain way.* (Female, age 27, religious)

*He’s been sort of the, he was the person who really pushed having Friday nights as a special family night and did certain rituals and stuff to make it special and important.* (Female, age 36, nonreligious)

*The idea of a power greater than yourself, the idea of, that the decisions you make and the actions you take come from some deep, inner place and that you want to cultivate that connection with that place within and have your behavior and your actions come this deep place.* (Female, age 42, religious)

The idea that spirituality has behavioral aspects is akin to the notion of “spiritual
practices,” or particular activities that one participates in as part of the spiritual growth process. Here, meditation, yoga, and rituals are specifically named. These practices will come up again in respondent narratives about using spirituality both in practice and in their personal lives, which is covered in Chapter 6. Meditation, yoga, and rituals are some of the many interventions practitioners say they have used in the social work practice context.

**Spirituality is a State of Being**

Respondents describe spirituality in terms of a state of being, specifically *comfortable/comforting, feeling safe, and peace/peaceful*. The descriptions below seem less about characteristics that one would use to describe spiritual people or less about actions that are a result of spirituality, and more about how spirituality makes people feel; how you “are” when you are spiritual. Rather than fit these ideas into the themes discussed so far, a separate theme is warranted. The first example of spirituality as a state of being is from a female respondent, age 58 who is nonreligious. She is describing a person who she considers spiritual. She says, “Sometimes you want to model yourself after that. That would be very nice. And I’m sure that some people, some people have told me that they feel that way about me. That they feel comfortable.” A 42 year old religious female respondent says, “That deep place (spirituality) is somehow a source of solace and a source of comfort and a source of happiness.” A 38 year old religious female says about herself, “People are like, why do you—she’s just always calm, nothing gets her upset. That’s how I am seen. ‘You are just even keeled, you just let nothing bother you,’ and you know that’s just, it’s a peace.” A female, age 64 who is religious says,
“Even though she is fully human and isn’t perfect, being around her I always feel a sense of calm.” This point is made again in slightly different ways.

And so we would talk about what that means to them, spirituality, and what are some ways to feel connected. I’m using the word connected, but maybe to feel... well, that’s the best way I can describe it. But, what is that place for you? That place where you feel content and happy and peaceful and feel safe. (Female, age 36, nonreligious)

Oftentimes the framing is that if you can feel safe and can come to feel safe and allow for that internal gentleness and kindness, others will come to you or you will be involved with others and those others will actually have a gentler, kinder frame. Life tends to be a lot more fun. (Male, age 54, religious)

Spirituality as a state of being implies that spirituality not only entails certain beliefs which result in behaviors and actions, spirituality also entails an overall sense of contentment and well-being.

**Spirituality is Multidimensional**

Respondents describe spirituality in a variety of dimensions, which begin to move away from attributes of spirituality as they are applied to specific people. These dimensions include beliefs, communal, connection, cultural, fate, having faith, higher power/relationship with God, hope, love, and nature. I think a more comprehensive understanding of spirituality emerges from the data when these many dimensions are considered as one, a kind of multidimensional theme. Each respondent supplies a different part of the spirituality puzzle. Here, respondents begin to verbalize their personal answers to the question of “what is spirituality?” Notice that several of the examples to follow begin with “I think.”

One dimension of spirituality is beliefs. A female respondent, age 27 and religious, says, “I think, to me, spirituality is taking those beliefs and applying them to your life and living it out. Spirituality shapes how we look at and view different things.”
A 34 year old nonreligious female says, “it’s not about a higher power or God or anything like that but more around making good choices and being, and having appropriate beliefs and having really solid values and being proud of them.” Note that respondents have an expectation that not only is it important to have certain beliefs, but spirituality is about application of belief to everyday life. It must be useful and meaningful on a regular basis.

Another dimension of spirituality is a communal one. Although spirituality is highly personal and varies individually, it maintains a group aspect. A male, age 50 and nonreligious says, “I think it’s a communal experience, often times, or at least for me, that’s what works best.” Related to the communal dimension is the connection to others inherent in spirituality. A 32 year old nonreligious female describes spirituality this way:

*For me, it’s a sense of connection and responsibility to the human community. I guess animals, too, so to all living things. I guess the New Age folks would see it as a connected energy. We talk about the collective unconscious. There is a connection. Physics proves it. When one thing happens there’s a domino effect. Everything is touched by everything. I try to be accountable and responsible.*

A female, age 53 who is nonreligious says, “Spirituality is being connected to the world around you and the people around you and to a force that is larger than all of us.”

The connection dimension of spirituality as described by these respondents reflects a systems perspective.

*Culture* is another important dimension of spirituality. A female, age 38 who is religious emphasizes the role of spirituality within specific cultural contexts. She says, “I think we also have to think about the importance of one’s spirituality within their culture. Um, for a woman of color, you know, the church is a very significant part of the black community.” One outcome of social work education and a measure of effective
practice is cultural competence. A 32 year old nonreligious female makes this connection as it relates to spirituality.

*One thing they did teach* (referring to social work education) *was how important it was for us to remain culturally competent. When a client walks in the door with something we don’t understand, whether it’s a particular illness that they have or that their religious background is foreign to us, we are obligated to learn about it on our own, not to turn our clients into our teachers, but to go and learn about it.*

*Fate* is a dimension of spirituality. Here, respondents disagree on the explanation of why events happen, yet each has incorporated her view of fate into an understanding of spirituality. A 69 year old female respondent who is nonreligious says, “But I do believe that things happen, not for a reason, but random, randomly. And I don’t believe in tempting fate, but fate is fate.” In this case, spirituality makes more sense when life events are not connected to some unexplainable higher force over which we have no control. In the opposite vein, a 38 year old religious female respondent says, “I don’t believe in coincidences anymore, I don’t believe in coincidence. I don’t believe things happen just for the sake of happening. There’s a purpose to it, even meeting you today, this feels very purposeful, very intentional.” Life events, in this case, make sense if they are viewed as part of a larger picture in which everything is connected.

Another dimension of spirituality is the concept of *faith*. For some respondents, faith is the preferred term. For example, a female, age 32 who is nonreligious says, “Spirituality, if I were to try to explain it to a child who asked me about it, is having faith.” Another female, age 34 and nonreligious says, “I guess I talk more about faith than spirituality and I think that in my mind those words um, are quite similar or I guess I use them similarly.” According to Fowler (1981), a well-known theorist on faith development, defines faith as “the most fundamental category in the human quest for
relation to the transcendent” and as “an orientation to the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions” (p. 14). Why respondents would use the term faith to define spirituality is illuminated using Fowler’s text.

Spirituality is also about a higher power and some respondents specifically include God in their language. For example, a female who is age 27 and religious, says, “I think spirituality is based on a higher power. When I say higher power I mean what we operate through and what we operate from; how we function, how we view things.” Another respondent, a 42 year old religious female, says it in this way. “On a frequent basis, whether it’s several times a day, or some kind of regular basis, the person is considering the idea of a higher power or God as it relates to how they conduct themselves in life.” A 38 year old religious female says, “For me, spirituality means a relationship I have with God. That is my spirituality.” Nonreligious respondents tended not to use the term higher power when describing spirituality. In fact, a 32 year old nonreligious female makes the following statement, “There isn’t, for me, a reliance on a higher power.” This is one of the few examples of themes that were distinctively found in the narratives when religious and nonreligious were compared to each other. Perhaps the term higher power resonates with religious respondents because it is a natural assumption to assume that we mean God when we say higher power.

Another dimension of spirituality is hope. A female, age 36 who is nonreligious says, “To me, spirituality embodies a sense of wholeness and in some ways, hope.” Hope gives people a reason to live, to see beyond the circumstances of the moment. A male respondent, age 36 and religious says, “And there just seems to be always a hopefulness that even if it is tough or if things don’t work out, or if there’s some big questions in life,
there’s hope that the right decision’s going to be made because of the prayer life and seeking out the spiritual guidance.” By giving hope, spirituality can be a motivating factor in people’s lives.

Another dimension of spirituality is love. For example, a female who is 69 years old and religious says, “It means . . . being loving to other people, loving myself which is difficult, loving other people, those which aren’t very loving.” This love is unconditional and nonjudgmental, love that accepts people for who they are and allows them to grow and develop. A 42 year old religious female respondent says it in this way.

*This is a model I picked up from a previous social work experience, um, and I feel there’s a lot of spirituality in that because it’s, um, it’s about love and appreciation and it’s a safe space, um, a tolerant space. And the work we do comes out of this, these feelings. So we produce, not out of pressure or fear, competition, or threat, you know. Um, but out of a place of loving and caring for each other.*

Spirituality can also be nature and connections to the physical environment. A 50 year old male respondent who is nonreligious says, “And I think for me that there is something spiritual about nature, and about being in nature, being by the ocean, swimming is a spiritual experience for me. So I think I find spirituality not in the church or the synagogue, but in nature and the woods, under water, in the rain.” A female who is 64 years old and religious says, “people talk about they can find God on the beach. Well, if I’m walking on the beach and I connect with that part of myself, yeah.” Spirituality experienced in the context of nature challenges the more narrowly constructed notions that spirituality is confined to something other than or beyond the physical world.

Spirituality as multidimensional emphasizes the depth and richness of the concept of spirituality and defies the possibility that the fullness of the term can be summed up in a simplified definition. While it might be useful for many reasons to offer succinct
definitions of the term, it is important to recognize that spirituality is multidimensional and understand what some of those dimensions are, particularly how an individual makes sense of the term.

**Spirituality as Meaning-Making and Purpose in Life**

Respondents describe spirituality as the quest for making meaning and finding purpose in life. This definition is consistent with current social work literature (i.e., Canda, 1988; Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999; Sheridan, 2004; and Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, 2007). Part of the human experience involves difficulty and struggle. In reality, social workers are involved on a daily basis in the process of helping people through their challenges. The role of spirituality in coping with disease, illness, suffering, and loss emphasizes meaning-making.

Spirituality as meaning-making points to the universality of the human experience in terms of joy and suffering. Spirituality as purpose in life points to the need for humans to transcend ourselves, to connect to things outside ourselves as we look for answers to the questions “Why am I here?” Reflective of Frankl’s (1984) work, while suffering is not necessary for meaning-making, meaning is possible in the midst of suffering; the spiritual quest is not just about making meaning of a whole lifetime, but finding the specific meaning of a person’s life and a given moment in time. For example, a male respondent, age 50 and nonreligious says, “(Clients) in their moment of desperation, that they would turn to spirituality as a way of making meaning of their experience.” This respondent also speaks to the purpose in life theme.

Also included in that are creation myths and sort of, “why are we here?,” those sort of existential questions. What is our work here? What is it we’re here to do? Are we just snails on a beach? Or with a meager existence of just trying to propagate the species or do we have some sort of over-arching purpose? Most of
us have the comfort that there is some sort of larger purpose, whether its to do
good works, or to practice random acts of kindness, that kind of thing.

A 53 year old religious male says, “It’s how people make meaning in the world.
It’s how people contend with evil and suffering. Um, um, I ask my clients, you know,
how do you make meaning out of this tragedy, um, without necessarily individually
turning to God?” A 38 year old religious female who practices primarily with social
work students, says, “So what I found was that the students welcomed someone helping
them to figure out their journey, what their purpose is . . . I think that is part of it. I think
that is part of spirituality. We all have our purpose and a reason why we are here.” A 58
year old female respondent who is nonreligious says, “The idea that there’s something
more and something larger and something that gives us a, a raison d’etre in our, in our
spiritual life.” A male respondent, age 49 and religious, makes the most distinct statement
connecting meaning-making and purpose in life to an overall definition for spirituality.
He says, “For me, the operational definition I work with or I go by is spirituality is one’s
search for meaning and purpose in life.”

Meaning-making and finding purpose in life are widely-accepted general
definitions of spirituality. As broad “umbrella” definitions, they encompass the more
specific dimensions of spirituality that emerge when a number of individuals share their
experiences. In other words, spirituality is the process of making meaning out of and
finding purpose in one’s life; how one individual accomplishes this may be different from
another, yet the experiences of each become specific dimensions of the general whole,
providing a richer, deeper, more “fleshed out” understanding of what spirituality is.

Framework for How Social Work Practitioners Define Spirituality

Figure 3 is a visual representation of the emergent grounded theory framework for
Figure 3: Framework Describing How Social Work Practitioners Define Spirituality

What is Spirituality?

Meaning-Making/Purpose in Life

- General Definitions

Multidimensional (i.e., communal, cultural, hope, having faith)

- More Abstract

Characteristics
Behavioral Aspects
States of Being

- Specific Descriptors of Spiritual People

Role of Religion
Defined Individually
Nature of Spirituality

- Context

Difficult to Define
understanding how social work practitioners define spirituality. First, respondents struggle a bit for language to define spirituality and acknowledge this difficulty. They then offer definitions in a contextual backdrop that includes a discussion of the role that religion plays in our social context, the many meanings of spirituality that depend on the experiences of each individual person, and considerations around the nature of spirituality: whether we think it’s universal and developmental.

With those considerations in place, respondents give specific attributes to spirituality that are most easily assigned in the context of describing spiritual people. These include specific characteristics, behavioral aspects, and states of being. More abstractly and in direct response to the question, “What is spirituality?” respondents provide many dimensions of spirituality, including communal, cultural, hope, and higher power. Finally, respondents offer broader definitions of spirituality, definitions which encompass their varied descriptive attributes of spirituality, yet are more succinct and perhaps “usable” in terms of commonly accepted language. These more general definitions describe spirituality as making meaning of life experiences and finding purpose in life.

Case Illustrations

The data, as I have analyzed it thus far, takes apart each respondent’s interview line-by-line, then puts the aggregate themes back together for the creation of a grounded theory. I will now offer case illustrations of two respondents using their own words to demonstrate how my framework for describing what spirituality is plays out in their experiences.
This respondent is a White male, age 50, who identifies as culturally Jewish. He is a private-practice therapist with 25 years of experience, and sees clients with primary issues around health and medical concerns. A total of 66 quotations were selected from his narrative. Regarding the question of how social work practitioners define spirituality, this respondent reflects six of the 10 categories derived from all the narratives. How he defines spirituality is reflective of the framework introduced in Figure 3.

Although this respondent did not express initial difficulty in defining spirituality, his narrative does demonstrate the role of religion in defining spirituality. While he states that spirituality and religion are not the same thing, he does understand and describe the connection between the two terms. In discussing his own upbringing in the Jewish tradition, this respondent begins to clarify what spirituality means for him.

So that it (referring to Hebrew school) didn’t have any particular meaning for me . . . So I became more agnostic, and sort of just disenchanted with it, um, it was hard for me to take it seriously . . . And I think it was also the sixties so there was also the “question authority,” question the dominant culture ethic was there anyway. And that appealed to me too so it was easy to sort of abandon spirituality in terms of the religious sense.

Other quotes reflect a clear distinction in his understanding of spirituality. Here he references a conversation he had with a client who was interested to know about his religiosity. He said, “I’m not explicitly religious, but I am a spiritual person.” He then goes on to reflect on the possible ways in which the two are connected. He says, “Spirituality for me is really a more personal thing. It’s not necessarily to be found in religion, although religion can help lead one there” and “I believe that one can be both religious and spiritual in the way that I’m talking about it, too.”

At the next level, this respondent describes spirituality in terms of several specific
attributes. The first is its behavioral aspects; his responses reflect the idea that people who are spiritual or are in touch with spirituality act in specific ways. Many of these quotations were in response to a question asking the respondent to describe someone who he considers to be a spiritual person. He says “he meditates . . . everyday, he’s been practicing yoga for years.” He also understands spirituality as having specific characteristics which can be described, particularly in the context of spiritual people. For example, this respondent says, “he lives simply” and he’s “self-realized and more evolved as a person than myself.” He also asserts that spirituality is “about us being consistent.”

This respondent also resonates with the multidimensionality of spirituality, and offers many of the multidimensional themes presented in this study as part of his narrative. He refers to spirituality as beliefs, communal, connection, cultural, hope, and nature. Here are some examples of these themes in the words of this respondent.

(My clients were) looking for hope in a way that medical science couldn’t help them, their families were limited in what they could do for them, so maybe this “God- person or thing” could be useful for them in some way as something to hold on to.

And I think for me that there is something spiritual about nature, and about being in nature, being by the ocean, swimming is a spiritual experience for me. So I think I find spirituality not in the church or the synagogue, but in nature and the woods, under water, in the rain.

I think it’s a communal experience, often times, or at least for me, that’s what works best. I’m drawn to being with groups of people to explore spirituality together.

Finally, this respondent’s narrative is reflective of the two broader conceptualizations of spirituality that emerged from the data: meaning-making and purpose in life. For this respondent, these definitions were used to encompass the varied
ideas and aspects of how he understands spirituality, in order to offer a more succinct and usable, if you will, definition. He says, “(Spirituality is) how to make meaning out of the chaos of our world or the chaos of our individual lives” and “it’s about making meaning, attaining and maintaining an internal sense of peace given that we live in a world that’s a little chaotic and it’s hard to maintain that sense of balance and peace.” This statement demonstrates the poignancy of this quest:

So, spirituality is, for me, a contact with which to make meaning of experiences that we have as humans. That implies some way to explain what suffering may be about. It offers a context for dealing with death and dying. And the after life, which is often a part of religions or evolved spiritualities. Also included in that are creation myths and sort of, “why are we here?”, those sort of existential questions. What is our work here? What is it we’re here to do? Are we just snails on a beach? Or with a meager existence of just trying to propagate the species or do we have some sort of over-arching purpose? Most of us have the comfort that there is some sort of larger purpose, whether its to do good works, or to practice random acts of kindness, that kind of thing.

Case 003

This respondent is an African-American female, age 27, who identifies as a non-denominational Christian. She works with preschool-aged children and their families in a government-funded, agency based setting where she has been for three years. A total of 37 quotations were selected from her narrative. Regarding the question of how social work practitioners define spirituality, this respondent reflects six of the 10 categories derived from all the narratives. How she defines spirituality is also reflective of the framework introduced in Figure 3.

This respondent begins her narrative expressing some difficulty in defining spirituality. She says, “It’s such a broad term.” She follows this up with statements about the role of religion (“I think spirituality stems from religion, because religion has a huge impact on motivating what we do and it is kind of the basis for what you believe”);
spirituality is defined individually (“I think it means differently to everybody and it looks differently in everybody”); and the nature of spirituality (“It’s life itself, to me, and, I think everyone has it”).

This respondent also provides many descriptive aspects of what spirituality means to her. For example, she identifies several of the dimensional themes that were derived from all the narratives, including relationship with God. She says, “It was more of a relationship now, a personal relationship between me and God. So that's how it evolved.” She also describes spirituality as love (“I feel that a big part of my spirituality is serving, loving, and being there for people in their time of need”); culture (“Spirituality can look very different among different people, but I think culture plays a huge part in it”); and beliefs:

*I think, to me, spirituality is taking those beliefs and applying them to your life and living it out. Spirituality shapes how we look at and view different things. Like if something was to happen, say, you get an illness. Based on your belief you are going to respond in a certain way. Spirituality is pretty much unique to your belief system.*

She also defines spirituality in terms of characteristics that are most keenly identified in spiritual people.

*This person is loving. When I say loving, I mean unconditional. You can tell them anything, you can show them your worst side and they won't judge you. They like to pray, they will pray with you and they will pray for you. They are not judgmental, which is really big for me, and they're always seeking God and trying to figure out the best way to handle things.*

*It encourages me, it motivates me, it makes me want to pray, and makes me want to make sure that I'm doing the will of God. It just motivates me as an example that I can follow and encourages me to grow in my relationship with Christ.*

She also includes references to spirituality as having behavioral indicators.

*Well, I was brought up in the church. We went to a Pentecostal church and spirituality to me, then, was going to church with my mom, going to Sunday*
school, going to Friday night youth services. It was more just going to church because my mom was in the church and that’s what we did as a family. So it wasn’t really personal, it was just something that we did in the family.

I think, to me, spirituality is taking those beliefs and applying them to your life and living it out. Spirituality shapes how we look at and view different things. Like if something was to happen, say, you get an illness. Based on your belief you are going to respond in a certain way. Spirituality is pretty much unique to your belief system. If God is the base of your religion, then you apply it to yourself and say, “How am I going to live this life so that I’m pleasing God?” “And if I’m sick, what am I going to do that will please him?” So spirituality is in the application to life.

This respondent stops short of using the specific language contained in the more general definitions of spirituality offered in this framework: meaning-making and purpose in life. However, many of her quotations are indicative of this way of thinking should she have been specifically asked to reflect on these two phrases. These case illustrations of two respondents using their own words demonstrate how my framework for understanding how social work practitioners define spirituality plays out in their experiences.
Chapter 5: Research Question Two

In this chapter, I will identify and describe the emergent themes related to research question two, where I explore with participants the fit between spirituality and professional social work. I will offer a framework, grounded in the data, which begins to explain how social work practitioners understand this fit.

What is the Fit Between Spirituality and Professional Social Work?

In the second research question, I ask: How do social work practitioners make sense of the fit between spirituality and professional social work? The fit between spirituality and their particular agency contexts? Eleven themes (linked to 111 quotations) emerged regarding the perceived fit between spirituality and professional social work; eight higher-level categories emerge when combining some of these themes. Figure 4 is a visual representation of my data analytic strategy for the second research question.

Social Work and Spirituality is a Fit

Many respondents feel that social work and spirituality is a good fit and express comfort and confidence in integrating the two in their practice contexts. This is consistent with the literature indicating that practitioners value the religious and spiritual dimension and are willing to address such issues with clients (Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Derezotes, 1995). I was able to group together quotations which, in some way, emphasize how social work practice and spirituality are “naturally” linked.

For example, a 50 year old nonreligious male says, “Spirituality, to call it an adjunct to what we have to offer sounds like such a small thing, but it can really be a powerful thing, especially when we begin to think of spirituality in a larger sense, and not
Figure 4: Data Analytic Steps—How Social Work Practitioners Understand the “Fit” Between Spirituality and Professional Social Work

Question 2: The "fit" between spirituality and social work

Themes combined into 8 higher-level categories

- Examples:
  1. Social Work and Spirituality is a Fit
  2. Separating Self from Clients
  3. Social Work as Spiritual

Codes grouped by 11 themes

- Examples:
  1. Yes
  2. Separate self
  3. Social work as spiritual

Quotations assigned to codes

- Examples:
  1. It's very important and always appropriate
  2. You have to be very careful that you're separating your own experiences
  3. It's sort of a transcendent moment

Narratives reduced to 111 selected quotations

- Examples:
  1. "So I think it's very important and always appropriate; it helps you better meet their needs."
  2. "I think you have to be very careful when you're doing practice that you're separating your own experience...and that of your patients."
  3. "It's sort of a transcendent moment. You can just feel connected to the person in a deep, meaningful way."

Social worker narratives on spirituality (N=20)
just about religion but as making meaning from experience and developing coping resources as part of that meaning making.” A religious female who is 27 years old says, “So I think it’s (referring to the integration of spirituality and social work practice) very important and always appropriate; it helps you to better meet their needs and better intervene on all levels to provide for the needs of the family or the person.” A 36 year old nonreligious female says,

*I would say the work that I do because I do a lot of mind/body work and anxiety and finding places where people can connect to themselves and others, be it art and music, um, outdoors—whatever that thing is that helps them—peaceful connection, um, a place where they felt whole and content and, um, that might be with family, it might be with a community, whatever that defined spiritual place for them that felt whole for them, then that would be part of our therapy, that’s part of what we do.*

A male who is age 53 and religious says, “So I bought the ideology of social work: bio, psycho, social. And religiosity and spirituality is part of the psychological and the social. So it’s always been part of that.” A nonreligious female, age 53, says, “It’s more focused internally (referring to psychology), whereas actually as a social worker, you’re supposed to look at the environment. Spirituality is part of the environment.” A 34 year old nonreligious female says, “So, um, I guess I think it’s probably always appropriate to explore, I can’t think of, I can’t think of a situation where it wouldn’t be appropriate.” A female who is 42 and religious says, “Well, as I define spirituality, I think it would always be appropriate to try as hard as you can to be loving and tolerant and, um, to act in the other person’s best interest and to be fully present. So I can’t see how that could hurt in any way.”

In summary, it is important to note that these respondents understand the fit between spirituality and social work practice within the contexts of their own
understandings of what spirituality is. In other words, how they describe this fit reflects the language that is similar to their descriptions of what spirituality itself is. For example, one respondent qualifies her statement by saying, “Well, as I define spirituality, I think it would always be appropriate.” Another respondent who defines spirituality in terms of “connecting to self and others,” specifically uses mind-body techniques to facilitate this connection for clients.

Another significant finding related to a perceived good fit between spirituality and professional social work practice is the idea that these respondents have used specific social work practice frameworks in their descriptions of where they see spirituality “fitting into” practice. For example, one respondent refers to interventions “on all levels,” emphasizing the multi-level approach of social work. Another emphasizes a systems theory perspective when she describes helping clients find “a place where they felt whole and content and, um, that might be with family, it might be with a community.” Another respondent specifically uses a bio-psycho-social framework, while another points to a person-in-environment perspective when she says, “spirituality is part of the environment.” Finally, another respondent alludes to the idea of starting where the client is when she talks about acting “in the other person’s best interest and to be fully present.” These respondents have identified several compatible frameworks for including spirituality, which are already used in the social work practice context.

*Social Work and Spirituality as Maybe a Fit*

Other respondents offer some uncertainty and ambivalence in terms of understanding the fit between spirituality and social work. The responses in this grouping reflect a certain amount of caution in fully embracing the integration of
spirituality and social work, or at least reflect conditional integration. Here, the importance of critical thinking comes into play. Integrating spirituality into the social work practice context is complex, and a “one size fits all” model does not work. These respondents are specifically concerned about the balance between integrating spirituality when it’s useful for clients and not causing harm to clients in its use. Whether or not there is a fit between spirituality and social work is also related to what the practitioner brings to the practice context.

A 54 year old religious male says, “So, in terms of where it might be negative, I have not had that many experiences, so, nothing is coming to mind at this point.” A female, age 38 and religious, says, “I think the place for spirituality in social work depends on the counselor and depends on the client.” A 50 year old female who is nonreligious says it this way:

It’s appropriate if it helps you to think holistically and, um, I think you have to be careful to separate spirituality from a specific religion but I think that, you know, you might not write something overly poetic in your notes, so in that way I think you have to use the language of the culture that you’re in, but I don’t think that you’d—it’s appropriate to use spirituality, but you might not want to use those words.

_Spirituality and Social Work Practice is Not a Fit_

Spirituality and social work are not a good fit under certain circumstances, primarily when the social work value of client self-determination is being violated. Respondents, first and foremost, clearly embrace professional values and ethics. For example, a 50 year old nonreligious male says, “But it should never be our agenda to make them more spiritual or to lead them to some spiritual path that’s really not of their own design. There’s something not ethical about that.” A female who is age 36 and nonreligious says, “I think the ethical concerns are you have to go to where the patient is,
and if it’s not something that they feel is important or something that they want to own, and you’re pushing that agenda, then it’s not ethical.” A 53 year old male who is religious says, “To me, it’s proselytizing. Um, the imposition of my belief system on somebody else is a violation of ethics.”

These quotations address the inappropriateness of proselytizing and suggest perhaps a hierarchy of concepts that are considered in the integration of spirituality and social work practice: the spirituality of the social work practitioner, the spirituality of the client, and social work values and ethics. Social workers should know what their own spiritual beliefs and biases are, as well as those of the client. These are then considered through the lens of social work values and ethics, with the best interest of the client taking precedence.

In summary, the integration of spirituality and social work practice does not include proselytizing or pushing an agenda held by the practitioner onto clients. Both violate professional social work values and ethics and serve as limitations on how far is too far.

*Spirituality is Important to Clients*

Further emphasizing the hierarchy established in the previous section, respondents were as equally sensitive to the needs and desires of clients in terms of integrating spirituality and social work. In other words, not only is it unethical to push spirituality onto clients who aren’t interested, it is important that social workers find ways to incorporate that aspect into the work with clients who find significance in their spirituality. For example, a 38 year old religious female says, “If their spirituality is something that they feel gets them through each day then I don’t understand why we
would not use that as an assessment. And try to use that as an intervention.” A male, age 36 and religious says, “Because I think it’s such an important part in somebody’s life and, so, I try to incorporate it in when I can.” A 53 year old female who is nonreligious says, “And I think people need spirituality. By the way, I never, ever tell someone to go to church or do this or that. It’s whatever works for them. That, I think, is important.”

*Separating Self from Clients*

Social work practitioners must be able to separate themselves, their experiences, and their beliefs from those of clients. Respondents view the integration of spirituality and social work practice as parallel to appropriate boundaries and self-awareness in good social work practice. A 27 year old religious female recalls a specific client interaction:

>This was her service that she was doing and she refused the heart transplant, where I on the other hand would say, get the heart transplant because we want you to live, you have small children, we want you to be around for your children. But that was her service, that was her honoring God, and that was her way of living life to the fullest in terms of embracing the fact that this is not what God would want from her to get this heart transplant. So it made it difficult for me because I want to see her in health and I want her to get the surgery, I want her to be available to her child. But that was her spirituality, a choice that she had to make and she felt that that was honoring God. So I had to respect that, even though I didn’t agree, so that’s how it becomes challenging.

A female, age 36 and nonreligious, says, “I think you have to be very careful when you’re doing practice that you’re separating your own experiences of how you are identifying spirituality and that of your patients. That’s the only ethical thing, but that’s just in general good practice.” A 38 year old female who is religious says, “The other piece for me is that a counselor also needs to know themselves very well because there are some counselors that can have boundary issues or the superiority that they might have and push a client into different things.” A religious male, age 49, says, “And I think that when it is not self-examined and questioned, when there is no opportunity to step back
and ask oneself ‘whose service is this spirituality being used and what end?’ And also being very transparent about that.”

We often talk about the importance of self-awareness as part of the process of becoming effective social workers, that the change process involves the convergence of the client and his or her beliefs, the social environment, and the practitioner and his or her beliefs. For these respondents, engaging in analyzing one’s own thoughts, feelings, and potential biases about spirituality and its related concepts provides the buffer that is necessary to preserve professional boundaries. A 1995 study by Derezotes & Evans asserts that social workers should consider their own spiritual growth as part of spiritually sensitive practice.

**Challenges to Integrating Spirituality and Social Work**

Respondents feel comfortable, for the most part, with the integration of spirituality and social work practice, yet many express specific challenges to this integration. In other words, it isn’t always easily accomplished, and the challenges come from a variety of sources. One challenge has to do with the macro issue of separation of church and state and the overlap, from a U.S. perspective, in understanding spirituality and religion. Interestingly, Canda & Furman (1999) found that social workers did not believe that integrating religion and spirituality in social work practice conflicted with the separation of church and state, yet in this current study, practitioners feel challenged by this pervading notion.

_We are a culture of separation between church and state. I’m glad we are, but in a way I think we shy away from those conversations a lot. Separation of church and state can push spirituality into the idea that it has to be on Sunday in the morning in this little house. It doesn’t come into the other conversations. I guess when I noticed it on the wall at Weight Watchers, I noticed it and I was surprised_
by it. I’d forgotten how much people of faith do integrate it everywhere, not just on Sunday. (Female, age 32, nonreligious)

The United States is such a place that they don’t really want to talk about spirituality separate from religion, so if there’s religion involved, it’s easier to have that kind of conversation. (Female, age 27, religious)

When I worked for the State . . ., of course, there is actually a law about the separation of church and state so I really could not openly talk about God or Jesus or whatever. (Female, age 67, religious)

Another kind of challenge is sorting out personal spiritual and religious values from professional social work values and the spiritual and religious values of the client. These responses reflect an ability of these practitioners to use the skill of self-awareness in mediating this challenge. In other words, I must know my own beliefs concerning spirituality and what impact those might have in the practice context. I must understand what spirituality means for each client I engage with. I must consider my own beliefs and those of the client through the lens of professional social work values and ethics when making decisions about how to incorporate spirituality in that particular practice experience.

And on my end, sometimes it is difficult because I have my spirituality in which I have my different views and ways in which I handle different things that may be different from someone else. And sometimes I may not agree with the way they handle something, but it’s their choice, it’s what they choose and what works best for them. It is difficult sometimes but if that’s what makes them function, then so be it, but sometimes it can be very challenging, because you may not feel it’s the best way to handle something. (Female, age 27, religious)

So… that was a little bit of a sticky situation where I had to really kind of go back in my mind and think, “well, did I really push something on somebody based on what I believe?” (Female, age 38, religious)

With some moms, maybe their ideas I don’t believe in, not even belief, but for me its considered fact and sometimes clients get into politics with you and I have my own ideas and my own understandings of certain topics and, um, a certain struggle or conflict. And these are also very difficult sessions which I try to keep focused and try to deal with it professionally in a way to fit the purpose of why
you are talking about that, and of course, it will not change my ideas of what I believe. (Female, age 40, nonreligious)

Other challenges to integrating spirituality and social work practice stem from the current state of the social work profession and its perceived ability to fully embrace and integrate spirituality. Respondents are not fully convinced that, as a profession, we are ready for this integration. This concern about the state of the social work profession stems from several historical factors: the adoption of a western medical perspective that values the scientific method over other ways of knowing, a move away from its religious roots to avoid the negative connotations that religion has come to mean over the years, and a changing worldview in general from modern to postmodern perspectives.

A 54 year old religious male says, “Relative to maintaining affiliation with the field (referring to the social work field), in terms of western medicine, I don’t think it is mature enough to address how spirituality can come into play in terms of interventions; I think we are looking at that through various mechanisms.” A religious male who is age 36 says, “It would be nice to have some specific training to be more comfortable on how to approach this subject. Because even though the desire is there for me, within the parameters of the way our field is structured, you know, it’s kind of been a taboo subject to approach.” A female, age 38 who is religious, says, “I found myself thinking of that this morning, you know, we say that we are committed to diversity as a profession, but there are exclusions to that, and that’s just my sense, and that’s something I am not happy about. We teach tolerance, but only around those things that we feel tolerant about.” A 64 year old religious female suggests new practice models. She says, “The first thing we have to do is to get rid of all the folks who were trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy
and I think that they’re, they, as, as the population of our profession ages, they become fewer and fewer.”

A final type of challenge when integrating spirituality into social work practice reflects the openness and readiness of clients to explore that area in their work with social work practitioners. While respondents reflect the value of client self-determination, they sometimes feel hindered by where clients are. For example, a 32 year old religious female says, “But it is a struggle if people have no connection at all, I think it’s a struggle. A therapeutic relationship can be a struggle, but just a connection with other people, period, is a struggle when there’s no connection or feeling of a connection to a greater power.” A female who is age 42 and religious says, “I’m sometimes tempted to say, uh, say things like, I don’t know, maybe that it’s a calling, that it feels like a calling or, um, or say things that bring me into the area of living a spiritual or religious life. And I sometimes try to say them as carefully as I can so that I’m not crossing a line that would upset anyone.”

**Spirituality versus Science**

Some respondents talked specifically about the juxtaposition of science and the scientific method with the notion of spirituality in terms of social work practice. In an attempt to be a profession, social work has emphasized the use of scientific methodology in work with clients, yet respondents acknowledge that spirituality, for the most part, cannot be “proven.” The following quotations get at the idea of spirituality as a subjugated way of knowing and the potential difficulty of spirituality on equal footing with science. This is an ontological concern, and respondents are offering their own “theories” to bring the two philosophies together.
A 54 year old religious male talks about the role of psychopharmacology in preparing people for spiritual experiences.

But the question’s a difficult question because, by all means, one does not want to alienate from the scientific method and the there is the issue of that... The benefit that comes with working with psychopathology is not entirely, by all means, controlled by spirituality. Because give me a medication that works and we then have the frame where the person can have focus, concentration, and a centering, or a reduced anxiety level; serotonin uptake works wonderfully well, endorphins again are present; or that tangential thinking is now brought so that there can be focus and concentration which is required in terms of being able to relate or feel connected to a spiritual, to a higher power, which for many people is the concept, or directly with Christ.

A 53 year old nonreligious female offers the “art of therapy” metaphor.

And then there’s the art in the science. And this fits more into the art of therapy—this is what people need and I see my role as-as long as they’re not hurting themselves or anyone else-using whatever I need to help them . . . I’ve seen how people have become physically ill when they don’t take care of their mind and their body and their spirit. And actually I’ve talked with doctors who are scientists, and the really good doctors believe that they have to take care of the spirit as well . . .But I think there’s-I think fear is really what it’s about. Because there’s no statistical data to indicate that spirituality helps, whereas I’m not—there is statistical data out around psychotherapy.

Social Work as Spiritual

Finally, several respondents feel that social work and spirituality are a good fit because, in essence, they view the practice of social work itself as something spiritual. In other words, the two are inextricably linked. These respondents reflect the idea that people are drawn to the social work profession because the work itself is a means of spiritual growth, as it facilitates meaning-making and purpose in life for the practitioner. This is another way that these respondents bridge the ontological gap between spirituality and the scientific method. An identity between social work and spirituality is created here, thus resolving any conflict between the two. For example, a 32 year old nonreligious female says, “I remember the term “secular humanism,” which I learned in
high school. I felt connected to that at the time, and that’s where I feel my spirituality lies . . . it’s important to me that the work that I do makes other people’s lives better in some way. So, it feels spiritual to me.”

A female, age 27 and religious says, “Well, social work in itself is serving. It is definitely rewarding when you are helping someone in need, when you’ve gone above and beyond to make sure that they're taken care of and that they have services and resources in place. That touches me because I'm doing something of service to someone else, which is huge in regards to my spirituality.”

A 36 year old female who is nonreligious says, “When somebody comes in and they’re looking for help, in some ways it’s a help to try and define themselves in how they view the world and themselves and their soul; they’re opening up. That, in itself, is a spiritual experience, you know, it can be.”

A female who is age 50 and nonreligious says, “It’s, um, sort of a transcendent moment. You can just feel connected to the person in a deep, meaningful way. It’s a feeling of transcendence, or of joy and meaning in the room. That’s hard to describe! But you just have this feeling that you’ve “got it right” and also when you don’t.”

A 49 year old religious male says, “Even as people come in to see me in the clinical hour, they’re seeking something beyond themselves, something that will not, uh, something that will help them to transcend themselves whether they transcend themselves in their ability to do things or they transcend themselves in their, um, uh, sort of their self-perception.”

A female, age 53 and nonreligious says, “But there is a connection, if you are going to be taking people through a therapeutic experience, of the spirit. People need to sense you’re with them. And I do think there’s something spiritual about it.”

A 42 year old religious female says, “And don’t forget, as social workers, fundamentally
what we’re here to do is, as I see it, really is to relieve the suffering of our fellow human beings. Basically that’s how I see it. And that is, um, a very, you know, there’s a lot of spirituality in that.” These examples reflect a holistic view of work, rather than a compartmentalization, a “making sense” of vocational experiences.

Framework for the “Fit” Between Spirituality and Professional Social Work

In an attempt to make sense of the ideas about the fit between spirituality and professional social work, as reflected in the quotations from this group of social work practitioners, I offer the following framework as a working explanation of how social workers understand and make sense of the “fit” and how they make decisions about when and how to integrate spirituality into their practice contexts.

Social work practitioners, through the course of their social work educational experiences, enter the practice world with a philosophy of social work, or ontological assumptions, if you will, about what social work is. These assumptions are typically grounded in a western, medical model that incorporates the scientific method and positivistic ways of knowing and understanding the world. These ontological assumptions are coupled with specific frameworks for understanding human behavior, frameworks that have become part of the language of social work. These include: systems theory, bio-psycho-social theory, person-in-environment, diversity, and “starting where the client is.”

Practitioners must then be engaged in self-awareness that causes them to examine their own spirituality: what do they understand and value about spirituality and what biases do they have related to spirituality that could come into play in the practice
context? Self-awareness is not a one-time activity, but a process that a practitioner engages in on a regular basis, whenever he or she reflects on his or her practice. Part of the reflective process includes some consideration of what the impact of the practice itself is having on the practitioner. Some experience the practice of social work as spiritual in and of itself.

The spirituality of the client must also be considered. No assumptions from client to client can be made in this process, and it requires that a practitioner really get to know and understand each individual client or client system using relationship-building skills and a social work practice framework. Where the client is in terms of spirituality carries more weight than where the practitioner is.

Practitioner spirituality and client spirituality is considered through the lens of social work values and ethics, being sure that the best interest of the client is upheld first and foremost. Through this critical thinking process, practitioners make decisions about how and when to integrate spirituality into the practice context. Spirituality and social work practice may or may not be a good fit under certain circumstances; the integration of spirituality and social work should look a bit different in each individual client or client system context. At any point in the process, practitioners can feel challenged in their ability to integrate spirituality into the practice context, be it due to ontological conflicts or differences between personal values and client values related to spirituality. These findings reflect clear tensions and divergent views in integrating spirituality and social work practice among a group of practitioners who self-identify as sympathetic to spirituality.
Case Illustrations

The data, as I have analyzed it thus far, takes apart each respondent’s interview line-by-line, then puts the aggregate themes back together for the creation of a grounded theory. I will now offer case illustrations of two respondents using their own words to demonstrate how my framework for describing the fit between spirituality and professional social work practice plays out in their experiences.

Case 002

This respondent is a White female, age 32, who identifies as having no affiliation with a particular religious tradition. She is an outpatient adult psychotherapist and has practiced in this particular setting for 2.5 years. A total of 47 quotations were selected from her narrative. Regarding the questions of the perceived fit between spirituality and professional social work, this respondent reflects six of the eight categories derived from all the narratives. How she perceives the fit between spirituality and social work is reflective of the framework introduced in Figure 5.

Within her particular agency context, which is hospital-based, this respondent feels that, yes, social work and spirituality are a good fit. While she describes an implicit understanding of boundaries related to integrating spirituality into her practice, she states, “We’re very much given free reign to practice in our own style. . .there haven’t been any barriers or anyone saying ‘do more of this’ or ‘do less of this.’” This respondent also expresses the inherent challenges in integrating spirituality and social work, specifically related to the separation of church and state.

*We are a culture of separation between church and state. I’m glad we are, but in a way think we shy away from those conversations a lot. Separation of church and state can push spirituality into the idea that it has to be on Sunday in the morning in this little house. It doesn’t come into the other conversations.*
Her narrative also demonstrates the three caveats, if you will, under consideration when a practitioner decides to integrate spirituality. The first, *spirituality is important for clients*, is reflected when this respondent says, “I guess when I noticed (spirituality) on the wall at Weight Watchers, I noticed it and was surprised by it. I’d forgotten how much people of faith do integrate it everywhere, not just on Sunday.” She also provides a specific example of her work with a client who really valued spirituality in her life. “I have a particular client who has been seeing her dead son for 10 years, but she is not hallucinating. This is part of her spiritual being.” She continues this statement by reflecting a certain tension, or challenge, between respecting clients while at the same time helping them to understand mental illness.

This respondent also cautions that in order for the integration of spirituality and social work practice to be appropriate, practitioners must separate their own thoughts, feelings, and potential biases from those of the client. She says, “because I have my own questions about spirituality in general and what it is and how it fits, I don’t know that I’ve ever formulated a map of how that fits into the mind/body/spirit,” demonstrating a level of conscious thinking about her own understandings of spirituality and how they impact her practice.

She also references the issue of spirituality versus science as a caveat to the perceived fit. She says, “I’ve always had a hard time with miracles. I’m a scientist. I’m a concrete observer,” yet reflects the theme that social work itself is spiritual as a way to make sense of the parts of the work that can’t be explained using scientific paradigms. She likens social work practice to the concept of faith:
Although I take things on faith, because you can’t practice as a clinician without a certain level of faith, even if you’re talking about something like psychoanalytic theory, which has no grounding in research, but you still use the theory. You have to have a certain semblance of faith.

When talking about the work she does, this respondent also says, “There just seems to be an energy and a spirituality to that kind of work where people are feeling freer, more spirited, and more alive, and liking themselves better.” This idea of social work practice as spiritual is summed up in this statement: “So, it feels spiritual to me.”

Case 004

This respondent is a White female, age 36, who identifies as nonreligious. She has worked in a hospital-based setting, providing outpatient mental health services, for the past year. A total of 61 quotations were selected from her narrative. Regarding the questions of the perceived fit between spirituality and professional social work, this respondent reflects five of the eight categories derived from all the narratives. How she perceives the fit between spirituality and social work is reflective of the framework introduced in Figure 5.

Several quotations from this respondent answer the question “Is there a fit between spirituality and professional social work?” as both yes and no, indicating that the answer to this question may not be clear cut, that only under certain conditions should spirituality and social work be integrated. For example, this respondent feels that spirituality is fully integrated in the work she does, saying,

And I think (spirituality is) fairly easy in therapy to deal with. I wouldn’t say that it’s my specialty but that’s 100% my practice and I’m not affiliated in that way as identifying, as identified as that person, so people wouldn’t generally assume that that’s the way I would practice, I guess.
Spirituality as a fit for psychotherapy seems “natural” to this respondent, as indicated in the following statement:

I would say the work that I do—because I do a lot of mind/body work and anxiety and finding places where people can connect to themselves and others, be it art and music, um, outdoors—whatever that thing is that helps them—peaceful connection, um, a place where they felt whole and content and, um, that might be with family, it might be with a community, whatever that defined spiritual place for them that felt whole for them, then that would be part of our therapy, that’s part of what we do.

On the other hand, this respondent cites specific ethical concerns about the fit between spirituality and social work; her specific concern speaks into the other themes of important for client and separate self. She says, “I think the ethical concerns are you have to go where the patient is, and if it’s not something that they feel is important or something that they want, and you’re pushing that agenda, then it’s not ethical.”

This respondent also recognizes some challenges related to the integration of spirituality and social work, specifically in the area of the separation of church and state. She says, “the United States is such a place that they don’t really want to talk about spirituality separate from religion, so if there’s religion involved, it’s easier to have that kind of conversation.” Included in her narrative are references to the need for practitioners to separate self from the client. For example, she says, “I think you have to be very careful when you’re doing practice that you’re separating your own experiences of how you are identifying spirituality and that of your patients. That’s the only ethical thing, but that’s just in general good practice” and “it’s amazing when you are very similar, I always have to take a step back and make sure to remind myself that I’m not that person, that my beliefs may be similar, but they may not mean I can jump to conclusion because we have so much similarity, um, if that makes sense.”
Finally, this respondent makes several statements about *social work as spiritual.* For example, she talks about work with a specific client using the spiritual concept of “connecting.” She says, “there was something that you could connect with that was truly human about what she (referring to a client) was going through and so I just connected on that level, and you know, I think, had her teach me her experience and how she views things. And that’s what therapy is about.” She also says, “when you go and talk in therapy, it’s about in some ways when you’re talking about hope, there are things that are good. To me, that feels spiritual” and “then somebody comes in and they’re looking for help, in some ways it’s a help to try and define themselves in how they view the world and themselves and their soul; they’re opening up. That, in itself, is a spiritual experience, you know, it can be.” She describes the worker/client relationship in this way: “That’s making a connection to another person. Relationship is spiritual. So I think we do it intuitively all day and especially in what we do as therapists.”
Chapter 6: Research Question Three

In this chapter, I will identify and describe the emergent themes related to research question three, where I explore with practitioners their use of spirituality in the social work practice context. I will offer a framework, grounded in the data, which begins to explain how social workers say they utilize spirituality.

How Do Social Work Practitioners Use Spirituality in the Practice Context?

In research question three, I ask: What do social work practitioners say about the use of spirituality concepts in their practice contexts, such as assessment and intervention, talk with other practitioners, or self-care? Themes related to this question were ultimately divided into two distinct categories: use of spirituality directly with clients and use of spirituality in personal ways. I will discuss the first category now, with the second to follow later in the chapter. Fifteen themes (linked to 231 quotations) emerged describing how social work practitioners say they use spirituality directly with clients. Figure 6 is a visual representation of the data analytic strategy for the third research question.

Exploring Spirituality at Intake

When thinking about the generic social work process, respondents identify the use of spirituality at several points along that process, beginning at intake. For example, a 50 year old nonreligious male says, “It becomes part of an intake interview now-a-days, with someone that you’re going to be with over time. You know, the kind of questions that you were asking me, in a less drawn out or flowered out sort of way.” A 32 year old nonreligious female begins to move the conversation along the practice process. She says:
Figure 5: Data Analytic Steps--How Social Work Practitioners Use Spirituality in the Practice Context

Question 3: Use of spirituality in the practice context

Use with clients (15 themes); Use with self (7 themes)

• Example--Use with Clients:
  • 1. Exploring at Intake

• Example--Use with Self:
  • 2. Specific Spiritual Practices

Codes grouped by two categories: use with clients and use with self

• Examples:
  • 1. Part of intake
  • 2. Spiritual readings

Quotations assigned to codes

• Examples:
  • 1. It becomes part of an intake
  • 2. Reading my Bible is really important

Narratives reduced to 309 selected quotations

• Examples:
  • 1. “It becomes part of an intake now-a-days, with someone that you’re going to be with over time.”
  • 2. “Reading my Bible is really important to me now.”

Social worker narratives on spirituality (N=20)
In the intake questionnaire, for example, that we have here, there is a question about asking what people’s religious affiliation is. My first interview with people always includes a question of “who are the important figures in your life currently?” I mean, you get history, but also “who are the important figures and who or what do you turn to in times of stress?” If, and when, that patient answers a faith, a spirituality, or a religion that they’re using in their life, then it pretty much automatically becomes incorporated into the treatment.

In other words, exploring spirituality at intake is then useful at other times in the process. A female, age 69 and nonreligious says, “It’s good for me to know what religion--I may ask that in, um, doing an admission. On page one and two, supposedly for an admission, as a therapist in a nursing home.” A 53 year old female who is nonreligious says, “I do a more formalized intake in the clinic or a less formalized one in my private practice. I always ask whether people are, consider themselves spiritual, and that answer actually gives me an idea of what’s important to them.” In fact, these practitioners emphasize the routine inclusion of spirituality and religion on the forms used in their practice settings. This makes sense when remembering the push by professional associations (like NASW) and accrediting bodies (like the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO)), towards the inclusion of spirituality as part of understanding client needs.

**Spirituality and Assessment**

At the next step in the generic social work practice process, respondents also feel confident in exploring spirituality with clients. There are several specific references to assessment. For example, a 32 year old nonreligious female says:

> If, either I didn’t ask the question or it didn’t come out in the first meeting, somewhere along the way I ask people whether it’s because a stressful event has happened, a loss, some sort of trauma they’re going through. I ask them, do they rely on faith? Do they have a sense of spirituality? Some sort of very generic question to draw out, are they involved or do they believe in something that they can keep thinking about in terms of the healing and what they’re going through.
A female who is 27 years old and religious says, “So when we do an assessment or when we talk with the family we do see what their belief systems are and where they're coming from, how they operate and make decisions or do various things.” A 54 year old religious male ties his assessment to a specific tool. He says, “We often look at and deal directly in terms of the genogram data-base with, what is spirituality? What does God look like? How do you understand God? What is your relationship to God? And what is your responsibility to God, what is God’s responsibility to you?”

Again respondents connect the assessment part of the social work process to its importance in later work.

*I think it is an important question to be part of the assessment because if that is what someone relies on heavily, that might be a good intervention that you can use.* (Female, age 38, religious)

*So I think getting back to that, getting back to basics is, you know, just your basic assessment is a pretty good tool. I think that’s even more important than putting in-you can’t put in an intervention in my opinion into place without knowing the person.* (Female, age 50, nonreligious)

*I think definitely in our assessments, in my assessments. I always strive to see if there’s any type of spiritual connection that impacts their lives because it plays a part in what they are going through right now, when I am working with them--whether or not there’s a connection.* (Female, age 32, religious)

Practitioners understand the role of good assessment in working with clients, and for this group, who already identifies the importance of someone’s spirituality in understanding human behavior, including spirituality in assessment is a must.

*Spiritually-Based Interventions*

Several respondents offer a variety of interventions that they say the have used or would use with clients. Some of the interventions are religious in nature, and others are not. These interventions include, but are not limited to: using art and music; deep
breathing techniques; using clients’ faith communities; encouraging spiritual practices such as prayer; spiritual reading, journaling, and use of rituals; and referrals to clergy when necessary. These interventions mirror the interventions studied by Sheridan (2004).

A 50 year old nonreligious male says, “He (referring to a client) came up with the idea of doing some drawings that depicted parts of his experience, and I directed him a little bit around that.” He also says, “One of the things that I did with her (another client) was to have her think about casting a spell on her apartment, to sort of create an aura of safety for her safety. And we tried to think about what that might look like, what could she do. And she sort of came up with, ‘maybe I could light some incense and walk around the room with it, and just sort of bring some intention with creating some kind of safety there.’ So in sense I think I was sort of working with her spiritual system.”

A female, age 32 and nonreligious says, “With deep, diaphragmic breathing and exercises, often, you can accompany them with a word on exhale” and “The other thing I use fairly consistently is the Buddhist book called Peace is Every Step, which is sort-of these very grounding and anxiety-reducing meditations for every day life.” A 27 year old female who is religious says, “We see if we need to connect them with spiritual supports or contact and include either a church or a temple, or whatever, in the treatment plan.” A 53 year old religious male says, “I pray for my clients. I pray for my students.” Notice here he says “for” and not “with”—an important distinction. On the same issue of prayer, a male who is age 36 and religious says, “I certainly have patients that I pray for, whether just throughout the day, or at home, they may kind of pop up into my head and I may say
a prayer for my patients - just that I hope that they get better, or that I hope that this very difficult situation that they’re currently in may get resolved.”

A 38 year old religious female gives an example of incorporating clergy when appropriate. She says, “If it is not an area of expertise for the worker then I do think that you incorporate their clergy or you know what their faith would identify as a leader.”

With regard to the use of rituals, a nonreligious female who is 53 years old says, “I often will talk, you know, or suggest that they go to the cemetery and visit the gravesite as a place where they could talk through and say goodbye and work through issues.” With a slightly different take on using spiritual interventions in social work practice, a 42 year old religious female says, “When that student comes in and sits down, I want to be fully present and fully focused on them. To me, I see that as a spiritual practice. And I’m not perfect at it, but that’s the ideal that I strive toward.”

Social work practitioners say they use a variety of spiritually-based interventions, derived from discoveries made through the assessment process, in their work with clients.

*Spirituality and Termination*

In continuing to explore the use of spirituality through the generic social work process, respondents speak of spirituality as they specifically use it in the termination process.

*But I was sort of moved, just prior to the last session--in one of my offices I have beach stones that I’ve collected from various beaches that I’ve been and he’s (a recent client) noticed that. And he developed what he called an altar, sort of an energy space in his living space for a while, that sort of just became a place for him to focus on. Even though he didn’t quite meditate, he wanted to create a space of safety and spirituality so he would have his own little things there. So I gave him a stone from my pile to add to his. And it was a stone that had a, it was an amalgamation of two different kinds of rock, one was black and one was white. Since a lot of our work was sort of about acceptance of both sides, the shadow*
with the light, the toxic with the powerful. It sort of had, for me, spiritual significance. (Male, age 50, nonreligious)

In terms of it coming up in termination, I can recall when I left my last job right before I came here, some of my clients relying on their faith in God in terms of, “OK. I’m letting this relationship go. I’m having faith in God that the next relationship, the next therapist, will be able to help me as you’ve helped me,” having conversations like that. It’s one more piece of the puzzle of their support system, that if I know it’s part of them and the work that we’ve done, I will raise it if they don’t. (Female, age 32, nonreligious)

It makes sense that termination would reflect spiritual language, metaphors, and frameworks if those have been present in other parts of that particular client/worker relationship.

**Spirituality and Specific Client Issues**

Several practitioners emphasize particular client issues that they feel are most appropriate or most amenable to utilizing spirituality. These issues include addictions, grief and loss, trauma, and people who are engaged in behaviors that go against their own religious beliefs. For example, a 53 year old religious male says, “And about working with people in recovery, working with people in trauma, working with death and dying—spirituality became pieces of it.” A female who is age 53 and nonreligious says, “I think that’s because, often to be sober, involves connecting to a higher authority.” A religious male, age 36, says “I guess what comes to mind, somebody close to them has died and they’re currently in the grieving process--that is a time I think using that element of spirituality is very helpful” and “Certainly when I’m dealing with distressed marriages, and the decision as to whether to divorce and really a conflict as in--the marriage is a mess, they’re miserable, but, yet, they don’t agree with divorce and from their upbringing, or from their faith, that divorce is not appropriate.”
A 34 year old nonreligious female who works primarily with children from military families says, “I see that the kids talk to one another about significant events in their life and what that means to them um, and typically the significant events are around someone dying, the kind of praying they do if they have a parent deployed.” A 36 year old nonreligious female makes sense of trauma as a spiritual issue. She says, “So also, when you’re dealing with trauma, at some point or another, that comes up. You know, how do you see yourself in the world, you know, in the spiritual sense, why things happen to you, why things are important to you. And I think it comes back to healing, a place where you feel good about yourself, connected, and peaceful, I guess.” Indeed, the literature demonstrates higher levels of spirituality use in fields such as aging, addictions, hospice, and palliative care settings (Andrews & Marotta, 2005; Frame, Uphold, Shehan, & Reid, 2005; Galek, Flannelly, & Galek, 2005; Jackson, Paul, & Cook, 2005; Koenig, 2006; Neff & MacMaster, 2005).

Specific Therapeutic Styles

Along with using spirituality with specific client issues, respondents feel that specific therapeutic styles are more conducive to integrating spirituality in the practice context. These styles include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and related 12-step models, dream work, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and narrative therapy; psychoanalytic theory is specifically thought to not be as amenable to the use of spirituality.

*In terms of my practice, I think of spirituality as a little bit like maybe dream work, which is something I’ve done some reading and thinking about.* (Male, age 50, nonreligious)

*If someone has a particular spiritual faith, it works very, very well to integrate CBT with those. With deep, diaphragmic breathing and exercises, often, you can accompany them with a word on exhale.* (Female, age 32, nonreligious)
And I actually find narrative styles of therapy, solution-focused, much more, cognitive-behavioral, much more receptive to addressing spirituality than to the traditional psychodynamic. (Male, age 53, religious)

I think 12 Step programs can be intensely spiritual, um, and I certainly encourage people to attend any of the, you know, AA, NA, Al-Anon, Al-Anon, all of those. (Female, age 64, religious)

First thing we have to do is to get rid of all the folks who were trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and I think that they’re, they, as, as the population of our profession ages, they become fewer and fewer. (Female, age 64, religious)

My actual focus a lot is cognitive-behavioral which may seem like, you know, in conflict with this. But it’s really not. (Female, age 53, nonreligious)

Integrating spirituality and its related concepts into social work practice comes more naturally when part of an overall therapeutic framework that includes spiritual aspects (as in 12-step models) or includes space for exploring client spirituality (as in narrative therapy).

Defining Spirituality with Clients

Respondents are clear that in order to integrate spirituality into work with clients, it is necessary to first explore with clients what spirituality means to them. Ethical social work practice requires that we “start where the client is.” Spirituality, in its own terms, elicits various meanings depending on what someone has experienced. Understanding how an individual client or client system defines spirituality prevents a “one size fits all” treatment plan. I offer three examples of what defining spirituality with clients looks like from practitioner narratives.

But first we have to define what spirituality is and once we have defined it and have built a relationship, and I get to pull from what it is that they are saying ... at some point maybe we can address that and, especially when we are dealing with intervention, being able to kind of pull from what we have already talked about and say, “Well what about this?” “What do you think about this?” And I can present it in a way that they can see it but not me imposing that they have spirituality. (Female, age 27, religious)
(Referring to asking clients:) How do you define spirituality and is it different and how do you differentiate it? Can you differentiate between religion and spirituality? And for a lot of people it’s one and the same or has been one and the same and you know, your core belief structure when you’ve been hurt in so many ways. I mean, with some of the patients that I’ve worked with over the years, it’s been part of the conversation. (Female, age 36, nonreligious)

For me, I try to, you know, if the discussion leads in that direction, it would be more of me trying to understand what is their conceptualization of their God. If they don’t believe in the same God that I do, what is it that they do believe in? (Male, age 36, religious)

Clarifying definitions of spirituality with clients happens as part of relationship-building, intake, and assessment.

Conversations about Spirituality with Clients

In the same vein, other respondents talk about having general conversations with clients about spirituality and the meaning of spirituality in their lives as part of the regular helping relationship. Such conversations can be triggered by conversations on other topics and are often a process rather than a specific answer to a specific question about what spirituality is. For example, a 36 year old nonreligious female says, “The United States is such a place that they don’t really want to talk about spirituality separate from religion, so if there’s religion involved, it’s easier to have that kind of conversation.” A female, age 58 and nonreligious says, “And I see, I see spirituality more of a conversation, not necessarily a, a pat answer. And I think that’s a, that’s a little different twist on it.” A religious male, age 49, says, “Oh, the other thing, too, that comes up a lot has been people discussing their frustration with religion or their frustration with God or their frustration with organized groups. So seeing that as perhaps an opportunity for us to be able to have a conversation either on religion or on spirituality to sort of pull apart what the differences are for people so I thought about it also in those times.”
Mystery

In terms of how spirituality is used by social workers, some aspects of practice cannot be understood or described by conventional means. Respondents allude to the unexplainable, mysterious side of spirituality as it applies to the practice context.

For example, a 54 year old religious male says, “About 8 years ago, a woman came in whose son had died suddenly, probably nine months before. It was a very unusual session in which I was hearing the son’s voice and was very conflicted as to whether I would share this with the woman or not share it with the woman. I thought I was having a brief psychotic reaction. I cannot explain this session.” Despite the inability to explain what happened from a scientific perspective, this practitioner provided this anecdote as a specific example of how he has integrated spirituality in his work with clients.

A male, age 49 and religious says, “It is also something which is transcendent or which is beyond what they are expressing but it’s also something which is also within them. So because of that, and because it is a key aspect of people’s lives, I want to explore it . . . And you know, as I also pointed out, my working definition, some of the stuff is very mystical or metaphysical being much larger than them.” He is reflecting on the need to see and hear beyond the words clients are able to use to describe their experiences.

A nonreligious female, age 53, says, “And if you’ve done therapy, the moments when real shifts happen, it feels like it’s not just the two of you.” She is speaking to the sacred nature of the helping relationship itself, how not everything about the work with a client can be easily quantified.
Outcomes

When asked to think about the benefits of integrating spirituality in their work with clients, or to reflect on what difference this integration makes, respondents share some specific ideas. A 50 year old nonreligious male emphasizes empowerment as an outcome of using spirituality.

*And I think that was all about him developing a kind of spirituality that allowed him to have some empowerment in his life, that there were ways that he could tackle some of this trauma that he had been exposed to. That created a sense of power in him that would be hard to shake, not impossible, but it would be hard for him to sort of undo. So I think that that was a really exciting thing for us to collaborate on.*

A female, age 36 and nonreligious, feels that having a spiritual identity is helpful in the change process. She says, “I do a lot of working with people who are depressed, and a lot of times explaining that spiritual, or adding that spiritual element can help a lot in terms of growth and people tend to do better if they have some sort of spiritual core or identity.” A religious male, age 36, emphasizes the importance of coping and the connection between spirituality and coping. He says, “I would look at the spirituality as part of the, well, how can we tap into this element of your life and your belief system to help you cope with the current situation?”

Using the idea of spirituality as connection to self and others, two respondents speak to the power of connection in the human growth process.

*I do think that when people can use spirituality as well as shifting in their minds and their hearts, you know, mind, body, spirit, that it tends to--they feel better. And that’s the thing about spirituality. It helps people feel connected and feel better.* (Female, age 53, nonreligious)

*I have met some people that don’t have any sort of connection and they were lost. And without that connection to others I don’t know that a difference was ever really made.* (Female, age 32, religious)
Integrating spirituality into work with clients can add significantly to a client’s ability to grow and change and make progress towards goals.

**Using Spiritual Frameworks**

Using spiritual frameworks in professional practice is a specific technique used by some respondents, particularly if those frameworks are what would most resonate with and be most helpful to the client. This technique involves reframing clinical conversations using language that will be best understood by the client based on words he or she has used to describe experiences to the practitioner. For example, a 53 year old religious male says, “Because at the counseling center at (church), we’re much more conscious of using religious, spiritual metaphors, but I was using it before (in a previous practice setting). A male, age 54 and religious says:

> I think that one of the early seminars that I went to helped me to examine this issue. It was a Black minister who came in to do a talk on palliative care and his association with hospice and when he was talking about members of the black community, he was very very firm, extremely firm in his resolve that if you do not have a sense of spirituality or religion, please do not impede other people and the use of spirituality relative to finding comfort and understanding in God. Many people in the seminar I would say had issues with different religious factions, and, with that, there was a significant discussion with him and he was on the hot seat to a degree for this, but his resolve was very admirable. I examined my own practice relative to this intervention and resolved at that point that I would not be as obsequious around introducing conceptual framings that were teachings of Christ.

This example also emphasizes the cultural competence aspect of integrating spirituality.

A religious female, age 64 says, “If my clients use God language I will often use it in return. Um, and I’m realizing as I’m saying this that it’s almost always African-American clients and I’ve, and I, I just figured that out now.”

A 49 year old religious male says, “(The client) had such a strong interest in talking about her issues which she verbalized as a Biblical vice. She used to quote some
verses that have to do with the valleys and talking about the depth and the valleys of life
and how things are going up and down. And she was struggling with a depression and,
and as I listened to what she was talking about, I also began to connect with valleys
and the depths and the peaks of life that she was experiencing.” Using spiritual
frameworks in practice requires good listening skills and a level of comfort in mirroring
back to clients various spiritual traditions that may be very different from our own.

Separating Self From Client

As good social workers should, respondents are clear to state that when
integrating spirituality into work with clients, it is important to be aware of our own
values, beliefs, and biases related to spirituality so that we can separate those from the
values, beliefs, and biases of clients. Use of spirituality in social work practice comes
through a process of self-awareness, both as a beginning professional and in an ongoing,
reflective practice manner. Practitioner narratives emphasize the importance of separating
self from client.

Again, I don't impose my spirituality on anyone. So it's just me helping them to
work with what they have, in terms of their spirituality. Even though sometimes
inside, you're like, wow, yeah, I totally understand, and it feels good to know that,
you still work with them on that level where you're not there to meet your own
needs; you're there to help them to get whatever it is they are receiving services
for. It's working with them where they are at and with how they utilize their
spirituality, whether it's the same (as mine) or not. (Female, age 27, religious)

I know in social work school we had a team presentation in my Ethics of Racism
class, and I've always thought about, first of all its so important to separate your
own experience of spirituality from someone else's experience because its so
different and so personal. (Female, age 36, nonreligious)

I'm not my client. And, um, and I, sometimes when I teach the diversity course,
say that you know, similarities are often as confounding and confusing as
difference. In fact, I find it easier to deal with somebody who has a different
expression because, um, because there's this automatic assumption of knowing
when there’s kind of a shared, or perceived shared belief. (Male, age 53, religious)

I really have to... I think I mentioned this ... you really have to, kind of, be very in tune to how you project your views and values onto somebody. Because it’s easy to make statements with assumptions and, you know, they may take offense to that. (Male, age 36, religious)

Whatever that belief system is, because it’s not mine. I would never impose mine on them. Occasionally they will ask (me what mine is) and I’ll say, well, it’s, not, not really too relevant, because this is not about me, it’s about you. (Female, age 58, nonreligious)

I think that it’s just being sure that if a client has some more to say to you, “well I am a very spiritual person” you have to be sure to stop and ask “well what does that mean to you?” and not put your own meaning on that because you may have a meaning of what a spiritual person is, but being clear to what, ask and explore, well what does that mean to you, so in that sense when I hear that I don’t put a meaning to it, my own meaning to it, which again, is why I think I don’t use it (the word spirituality), but if someone else does, what does that mean to you? (Female, age 38, religious)

Understanding what I, as the professional, bring to the practice context is a lens through which client spirituality can be helpful in the change process.

The Social Worker Role

Several respondents have specific ideas about what role the social worker plays in terms of addressing spirituality in the practice context. This group of respondents, while unapologetically utilizing spirituality in their work with clients, seems to have created professional boundaries around the use of spirituality. For example, a 36 year old female who is nonreligious says, “And so, for many people, that could be doing yoga, mind/body work, doing exercise, all those kinds of things. So that was sort of where I was using my frame of reference could have been helpful, especially because I could inhibit people from doing something that could be helpful for them in terms of their recovery process and their own process of healing.” A male, age 53 and religious says, “But I don’t do
spiritual direction and that’s what I would, um, I would see as, you know, someone coming in and saying ‘I don’t believe in God anymore.’ A 49 year old religious male says it this way.

_Having said that, I also think that it’s not our, I hardly see it as my job to sort of shove it down people’s throats. So, um, I’m also very respectful that people may be at different places in engaging in that . . . But what I have found is that people--to not wonder about issues of spirituality in people’s life is to fail people on a key aspect of working towards cultural competence. And, I personally hold strongly that cultural competence--spirituality is just like other forms of working toward cultural competence._

A nonreligious female, age 53 says:

_And then there’s the art in the science. And this fits more into the art of therapy--this is what people need and I see my role as--as long as they’re not hurting themselves or anyone else-using whatever I need to help them . . . My major role is to be a therapist. So I use spirituality to attain therapeutic goals. But I don’t try to develop spirituality in people when it’s not there._

There are definite limits to the social work role, either in not using spirituality when it could be useful, or moving into professional territory better explored by someone from another discipline.

Starting Where the Client Is

The old social work adage “starting where the client is” holds true, as several practitioners make such statements related to integrating spirituality and social work practice. Using spirituality in the practice context should be client-driven, and is related to the previous idea that practitioners must separate their spiritual beliefs from those of the client.

A 50 year old nonreligious male says, “I just sort of worked with where she was to sort of use that as a way to get some resources for the situation, and it was non-judgmental.” A female, age 32 and nonreligious says, “Meeting the client where they’re
at. Asking the question and then leaving it up to them. The part about where I bring it back in, where I think that it may be helpful, where I think that there could be a way to ask somebody, “Do you have a particular belief about this and, if so, let’s talk about it in reference to what’s happening here?” A 36 year old female who is nonreligious says, “which has potential for having that conversation later down the road, but I think where people are at dictates whether or not that’s a conversation you have.” A religious male, age 53, says, “Listen to the story and listen to how it works; there’s a reason why this is and everybody changes. So, you know this is where he’s at.” A 67 year old religious female says, “I think you have to be sensitive to the clients. You have to be sensitive to where they are.”

A nonreligious female, age 58, says, “Spirituality is usually, in what I have done, is usually, or it usually has been directed by the client themselves . . . I think that, again, the whole idea is to start where the client is.” Discovering where the client is can be done through intake and assessment questions and as trust builds in the relationship. Spiritually-based interventions are then selected (or not) based on this discovery.

**Spirituality Not Useful in Some Situations**

Finally, several respondents feel that there are some situations in which it would not be appropriate to utilize spirituality in work with clients. Some of the scenarios emphasize what the client brings to the relationship (i.e., religious zeal or certain mental illnesses) and some of the scenarios emphasize what the practitioner brings (i.e., the need to proselytize). In essence, while spirituality can be beneficial to the change process for many people, it is not necessarily true for all.
A 32 year old nonreligious female says, “With someone who is psychotic and having religious delusions, certainly I would think twice about whether I would use it in that case.” A female, age 36 and nonreligious says, “I had one woman who was a Jehovah’s Witness who would come in with pamphlets for me, and that made it really hard because she thought that she needed to proselytize to me in order to change my views so then the world wouldn’t end and so it was hard to connect with her and to find a way to work with her in order to find a common ground. And why she would feel the need to do that in a session and that was part of the way that she looked at the world.” She also says, “Some people who are so character disordered and have no sense of self with others to begin with can’t have those kinds of conversations and so it’s not even part of your conversations because it’s so irrelevant to them.”

A 53 year old religious male says, “I do have a client now that is supposedly religious. He’s a Franciscan but his pathology is such that until we can get that taken care of, I don’t trust his communication around that.” From a practitioner perspective, he says, “To me, it’s proselytizing. Um, the imposition of my belief system on somebody else is a violation of ethics.” A 38 year old religious female says, “If somebody is delusional and very schizophrenic at the moment and is not on medication then I don’t think I would be talking about what spirituality means . . . I don’t think I would be talking about God or praying if people are hearing voices.” A religious female, age 64 says, “Well, if I had a client who was paranoid or psychotic I probably, and was hearing voices and was hearing God, I’m not so sure I’d talk spiritually.”

Social work practitioners say they use spirituality in their work with clients in a variety of ways, including at specific stages in the problem-solving process and with
specific client issues that tend to speak to the spiritual side of human existence. Use of spirituality, however, occurs in the context of ethical social work practice; when it’s client-directed, when it doesn’t extend the professional social worker role, and when it’s used differentially.

Social Work Practitioners and Personal Spirituality

The second category on the theme of using spirituality in the practice context is how social work practitioners use spirituality in their own lives. “Practice context,” for the purposes of this study, is defined as all of the facets that contribute to our work with clients, including: the practitioner (ourselves), the client, the relationship between ourselves and the client, the agency under which the services are provided, supervisory relationships, and the social work profession, particularly ethical mandates. Seven themes (linked to 78 quotations) describe practitioners’ personal use of spirituality.

Specific Spiritual Practices

Respondents say they participate in a number of practices for enhancement of their own spirituality. Some of these practices are religious in nature, and others are not. One practice is church attendance. A 27 year old religious female says, “Yes, I still do go to church. It means more to me now than just being told, ‘Go to church because that’s what I said.’ Instead, I’m going to church because I want to go.” A female who is 64 years old and religious says, “We found this Episcopal church . . . with a Celtic Liturgy . . . it’s Saturday nights and if we have 25 people there it’s a huge crowd and so again, the feeling of belonging and community are really important to me.” Another practice is journaling. A religious female, age 38 says, “I do a lot of journaling.” Meditation is also used by practitioners. Another religious female who is also 38 years old says, “He
(referring to God) gave me a scripture, it was a scripture just drawn to my spirit. It was Philippians 4:13, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’ And I just meditated on that.” Yoga is a useful practice. A male, age 53 and religious says, “Yoga puts me in touch with what has happened to my body living with HIV and having all these medications.” A 40 year old female who is nonreligious says, “So we had several teachers come in (sponsored by the agency) and give us yoga.”

Prayer is another spiritual practice used by practitioners. A religious male, age 53 says, “One of my collections are different kinds of prayer books and so depending on what my mood is, I’ll say the prayer in Spanish, the Anglican tradition, Roman tradition, I’ll do the feminist—I have feminist prayer books.” A 40 year old female respondent who is nonreligious says, “Like for example, if I have really a big problem or if I am going to a big test or if I want something really big and is really hard to get, I pray at night and just focus and ask God for support and for a clear mind and I feel then comfortable. And this is after I do whatever I have to do first and then, yeah, then I feel comfortable.”

Practitioners also use spiritual readings. A religious female, age 38, says, “Reading my Bible is really important to me now.” A female who is age 64 and religious says, “Thomas Merton’s book on Contemplative Prayer is the only book I’ve ever read that felt like me it had been written just for me.”

The use of rituals and symbols is another important practice for practitioners. A religious female, age 38, says, “One of my closest friends in my cohort is a Jewish woman, and so we have really connected with our faith during difficult times, in terms of seasons. I fast, she’ll have certain times when she fasts, and what that means for us.” A male, age 53 and religious says, “I have a mezuzah on my door that I kiss every morning
before I leave.” A 38 year old religious female says, “I wear my cross like every day, it’s just something that is symbolic to me.”

Finally, some practitioners have incorporated specific practices attached to Buddhism and Native American spirituality. For example, a 32 year old nonreligious female says, “I would say I’ve integrated a lot of the Zen teachings in terms of how I handle stress or strife, how I manage that.” A nonreligious male, age 50, says, “Other spiritual experiences that have been meaningful to me have been, I’ve done some Native American sweat lodges.” Despite the fact that practitioners in this study all self-identify as having a sense of what spirituality is and using spirituality the practice context, their use of spiritual practices in their personal lives is as diverse as their definitions of spirituality and as diverse as their use of spirituality in work with clients.

*Spirituality as Identity*

For some respondents, a sense of personal identity is directly tied to their sense of spirituality, particularly when spirituality and religion is linked to a particular culture or ethnicity. Practitioners with a Jewish background speak about how this personal identity is used in developing their current understandings of spirituality.

For example, a female, age 36 and nonreligious says, “I went with a program with the Peace Corps out of Israel, and that sort of helped me understand my own Jewishness and what was important to me. I always knew that Judaism was important to me but I really had not positive experiences in a lot of ways with where I fit in the Jewish community and where I fit in terms of how I define myself in terms of my spirituality.” A 50 year old nonreligious male says, “So I was raised with a Jewish identity.” A religious
female, age 42 says, “And we were culturally Jewish and celebrated holidays, but we didn’t really go to synagogue and worship.”

Practitioners with backgrounds in the other major religious traditions did not speak about spirituality and identity in the same kind of way, although some did recognize the impact of commitment to an organized religion on how we define ourselves as people. For example, a 64 year old religious female says, “For me, I knew there was a God and that for me is a core component of how I identify myself in terms of my spirituality.” It seems that Jewish respondents have an additional lens through which they must negotiate an understanding of spirituality.

**Spirituality as a Lifestyle**

Along a similar vein, other respondents talk about spirituality as being part of who they are, how they act, and how they see themselves in the world. Spirituality is, for these practitioners, a very integrated part of each one’s story. A 53 year old religious male says, “My father . . . was very religious as a Roman Catholic. My mother was a member of the Church of England and very religious and my grandmother--my father’s mother--was very religious. Um and so, religiosity and spirituality had always been a part of my life.” A female, age 38 and religious says, “My Christianity is so imbedded in me that it can come out without being intrusive or overbearing.” A nonreligious female, age 69 says, “I don’t think I’ve ever taken, you know, a (spiritual) journey. It’s just been a path of life experiences.” A 67 year old religious female says, “People should be able to look at you and see--and I hope people can look at me and maybe not just look but when talk to me a little bit, they can say, “well you know, there is something different about her.”
Spirituality that is more integrated is likely to be “used” more unconsciously because it is not thought of as a distinct, separate unit. I think these practitioners are trying to make this point.

*Use of a Higher Power*

Practitioners specifically acknowledge the level of importance of a higher power in terms of their own spirituality. For some, reliance on a higher power is an important part of their spirituality. For example, a 67 year old female who is religious remembers an incident when she distinctly heard what she describes as the voice of God. She says, “One Sunday I was in church and interestingly enough, the pastor was preaching on obedience and I mean I was just holding onto the seat in front of me and, umm, the Lord just said ‘I want you in New York’ and I couldn’t say no to that and I don’t know that it’s happened quite that way before or since.” A male, age 49 and religious says, “As somebody who’s working with perhaps something much greater than I can ever sort of name, but some kind of invisible hand or guide that is seeing who, is taking care of me . . .and has helped me to create a certain level of optimism in life.” These quotations reflect the guiding role of a higher power in the personal lives of these respondents.

For others, reliance on a higher power is not part of their personal spiritual worldview. For example, a 36 year old nonreligious female says, “By the way, I question the existence of God even though I am Jewish, but my definition of things is different than other people.”
Grief and Loss

Spirituality is particularly useful for social work practitioners in the context of having experienced grief or loss. In one example, spiritual rituals help in coping with a loss.

But I think what I took to doing, two things: one was that when I learned of a death, I would go home that day and light a candle and it would burn out until it was extinguished, and I would do a few minutes of what I would call a meditation on the candle, just thinking about the person, and remembering them privately to myself. . . That was my spiritual way of dealing with the loss. (Male, age 50, nonreligious)

In another example, the loss of a loved one serves as a catalyst for spiritual growth.

Spirituality I guess, came more, came about in my life around death (of a grandparent) and what that was like for me and what made sense to me and what was comforting to me and what I needed was knowing that those spirits will, were still in my life and present in my life when I needed them um, and to um, think about decisions. (Female, age 34, nonreligious)

The fact that social work practitioners connect spirituality and grief and loss both in their personal lives and in their work with clients speaks to a shared commonality of human experience.

Benefits of Spirituality

Practitioners address the benefits to maintaining spirituality in their own lives. In other words, personal spirituality, in its varied expressions, is seen as useful in coping with a variety of individual issues. For example, a 38 year old religious female says, “I don’t get as anxiety-ridden as I used to get.” Another female who is also 38 years old and religious says, “Because I have been in a place in my life where things have been too out of control, I have been a place in my life where days have felt too overwhelmed, and I had no where else to turn, and nothing else to do but say God, if you’re there, can you show me that? Help me for things to feel better. And they did.” A 53 year old
nonreligious female says, “I think the first is that I believe spirituality has helped me in my mental health, um, and I’ve watched it in other people.” A religious female, age 32, says, “Like for me when I am not as spiritual, I struggle, I worry, I stress and I don’t feel connected to others and I don’t see the goodness around me and the good things because there’s good in every day there’s good.” The idea that practitioners experience direct benefits from the use of spirituality in their personal lives parallels the idea, covered earlier in this chapter, that spirituality offers many observable benefits to clients when integrated into the treatment process.

Social Work Practice as Spiritual

A final theme underscores the significance for many respondents of the commitment they’ve made to professional social work. Several practitioners reflect on the nature of social work practice and offer the idea that the work itself can serve as a means of personal spiritual growth. The practice of social work serves as one specific catalyst for understanding and defining the meaning of spirituality.

A 50 year old nonreligious male says, “Um, I think through the years, as I began to work with medically ill people and seriously ill people, I began to appreciate the role of spirituality in their lives and I think that that affected me in terms of my experience of spirituality.” A female, age 36 and nonreligious says, “I think every connection that you make with somebody opens up that opportunity to look at things in a different way. It helps me define who I am as a person, definitely.” A 38 year old religious female says, “And I think that this (referring to current practice context) is leading me even more towards where God wants me to be.”
A nonreligious female who is 58 years old reflects on the impact of observing growth in clients. She says, “You can see, you can see change in people, which is very rewarding and that certainly feeds that, that spirituality piece of it and you’re, you’re feeling that you’re doing good. And doing good is, is part of what social workers do, hopefully.” A 49 year old religious male uses a Biblical metaphor to describe his experience of the therapeutic relationship. He says, “I always feel that they are, afraid or not, have opened this sacred space for me to step in and I feel like Moses taking off my shoes and walking into some of the painful stuff that they’ve gone through. So, I carry that with me and I struggle with this kind of interaction that is something deep that is happening.”

A 64 year old female who is religious explains how therapy can sometimes reflect a parallel healing process. She says, “I am sometimes moved to tears by the level of trust that people show me by what they say or by how they act in here. Um, when people are laid bare, you know, bare-ass naked and bleeding and to let me feel, and we’ll talk about it, this sense of trusting me, feeling safe enough to be that part of themselves with me that, that trust has always been um, an issue of mine and so um, I think I probably had never thought about this, I think I probably feel some healing within myself in terms of my distrust when clients trust me.” And a 34 year old nonreligious female retells a specific spiritually-meaningful event in her work with a client who had lost her home in a house fire. She says, “They needed to walk through the, you know, where the fire was and she asked for two people to be there. She asked, besides her husband, she asked for her um, her priest and she asked me and that was her sense of, that was her, that’s what she needed. She said that he covered the religious end of it and I covered um, I don’t
know what word she used but another supportive role. She kinda saw the two or us together making it um, comfortable enough, supportive enough for her to be able to take a walk through that house. So, that felt, that felt pretty spiritual to me, walking through that. I had never been through that before and I, you know, that was just a very eye-opening experience for me.”

Framework for How Social Work Practitioners Use Spirituality in the Practice Context

In an attempt to make sense of the ideas about how social workers use spirituality both in working with clients and in their own personal lives, as reflected in the quotations from this group of social work practitioners, I offer the following framework as a working explanation of how social workers say they utilize spirituality in the practice context. Figure 7 provides a visual explication of this framework.

Social work practitioners primarily use spirituality in two ways: in their direct work with clients and in their personal lives. In work with clients, practitioners use spirituality throughout the generic social work practice process, including relationship-building, intake, assessment, interventions, and termination. This process, as it relates to the integration of spirituality, is framed in the context of specific client issues with inherent spiritual aspects (i.e., addictions, grief and loss, trauma), specific therapeutic models that allow for the inclusion of spirituality (i.e., narrative therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy), and using spiritual frameworks to guide work with clients who find this approach useful. Practitioners are also cognizant of maintaining boundaries around addressing spirituality within the context of the social work role and of “starting where the client is.” Practitioners emphasize the need for a high level of self-awareness around spirituality, and acknowledge the “mystery” inherent in spirituality in that some
experiences that occur in the context of the worker-client relationship cannot be explained. Practitioners believe there are many positive outcomes associated with incorporating spirituality into their work with clients, yet at the same time recognize particular situations where such integration would not be useful (i.e., with clients who are delusional).

Practitioners also use spirituality in their personal lives. Many utilize a number of spiritual practices (i.e., spiritual readings, going to church, yoga), some rely on a higher power while others do not, and some use spirituality in coping with grief and loss. Practitioners speak about spirituality as part of how they identify and how they live their lives; in fact, the practice of social work itself is described by practitioners as spiritual in that the work provides the opportunity for real human connection and finding meaning and purpose in life. Just as practitioners identify specific positive outcomes for clients, they identify benefits to nurturing spirituality in their own lives.

Case Illustration

The data, as I have analyzed it thus far, takes apart each respondent’s interview line-by-line, then puts the aggregate themes back together for the creation of a grounded theory. I will now offer a case illustration of one respondent using his own words to demonstrate how my framework for understanding how practitioners use spirituality with clients and in their personal lives plays out in his experiences.

Case 005

This practitioner is a 53 year old Latino male who is religious and identifies as Episcopal. He has 23 years of post-MSW experience and currently practices as a therapist in a church-based counseling center, where he has been for the past 4 years. His primary
area of practice is with adults who have trauma and substance abuse issues. He also teaches in a local school of social work. This practitioner states that he received some informal exposure on the topic of spirituality in his social work educational experience. His narrative reflects nine of the 15 themes related to how practitioners use spirituality in direct work with clients, and three of the seven themes related to how practitioners use spirituality in their personal lives.

First, this respondent says he has used a variety of spiritually-based interventions in his work with clients. One involves the use of a client's faith community. He says, “and she said to me . . . ‘you know I’m thinking about consulting a wise-woman because, um, maybe my daughter’s been cursed in that and maybe she can help.’ A root woman, a voodoo priestess. And I said ‘well sounds like a reasonable idea to me. You and I have tried everything and, um, please let me know what happens, what kind of understanding that you derive from that.’” Another intervention is prayer. From a general perspective, he says, “I pray for my clients. I pray for my students” and “I pray about them all the time, and I find praying about them is better than what I used to do which is worry about them.” I think it’s important to note here that he uses the words for and about instead of with, indicating that prayer is not something that is done face-to-face with each and every client. Some within the profession might argue that praying for clients without their knowledge or consent pushes the boundaries of ethical practice. This practitioner will use prayer with clients if prayer is something useful for the client. He says, “I light a candle and he (referring to a specific client) always starts the session with a prayer and we end with a prayer.”
This practitioner also uses religious rituals and symbols in his work with clients. For example, he describes a specific interaction with a client in which it was helpful to offer a benediction of sorts. He says, “I put my hands on his shoulders and I said ‘this is Aaron’s blessing- may the Lord bless you and keep you, may he let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, may he be kind to you and give you peace.’” In working with another client who admired a wrought iron cross belonging to the practitioner, he used a Native American ritual around gift-giving. He says, “I said ‘in Native American tradition, when you give a gift, you give something that belongs to you that is important. This was given to me by my sister, who is very dear to me, and I give it to you. And one day you will pass it on to someone else who needs it.’”

This respondent’s narrative also reflects the theme of using spirituality in work with clients around particular presenting issues. In this case, he says spirituality is particularly poignant when clients are experiencing addictions, trauma, and/or grief and loss. He says, “And about working with people in recovery, working with people in trauma, working with death and dying--spirituality became pieces of it.” He also finds certain therapeutic models to be more helpful in integrating spirituality into work with clients. He says, “and I actually find narrative styles of therapy, solution-focused, much more--cognitive-behavioral--much more receptive to addressing spirituality than the traditional psychodynamic style.”

This practitioner uses spirituality in working with clients by allowing and encouraging conversations within the therapy context around issues related to spirituality. He says, “I ask my clients, you know, ‘how do you make meaning out of this tragedy?’” as a way to explore what spirituality is for each individual client and what might be
helpful in terms of integrating some of those ideas into the treatment plan. Here, we can see this respondent’s own understanding of spirituality as meaning-making come out in the way he prompts clients to think about their own situations. He also is very comfortable using spiritual frameworks to guide his work with clients where this is appropriate. Part of this is due to his current practice setting, which is explicitly church-based. He says, “because at the counseling center at (the church), we’re much more conscious of using religious, spiritual metaphors, but I was using them before (referring to working in a secular context).”

This practitioner also reflects the themes of separating self from client, the social work role, and starting where the client is in terms of negotiating the use of spirituality in working with clients. He says, “I’m not my client. And, um, sometimes when I teach the diversity course I say that, you know, similarities (between you and the client) are often as confounding and confusing as difference. In fact, I find it easier to deal with somebody who has a different expression because, um, because there’s this automatic assumption of knowing when there’s kind of a shared, or perceived shared belief.” He also says, “But I don’t do spiritual direction and that’s what I would, um, I would see as, you know, someone coming in and saying ‘I don’t believe in God anymore.’” This quotation offers a good summary of his thinking on these themes.

*I listen to the (client’s) story and listen to how it works; there’s a reason why this is and everybody changes. So, you know this is where he’s at. . .I’ve got to follow their lead. . . You are entering into somebody’s life at their most vulnerable and you have to treat that with absolute respect and dignity.*

This respondent feels there are times when using spirituality in practice is not useful or not appropriate. He says, “I do have a client now that is supposedly religious. He’s a Franciscan but his pathology is such that until we can get that taken care of, I
don’t trust his communication around that.” He also says, in reference to counseling that is specifically labeled as Christian counseling, “To me, it’s proselytizing. Um, the imposition of my belief system on somebody else is a violation of ethics.”

Regarding the use of spirituality in his personal life, this practitioner references several spiritual practices that he finds helpful. One is church attendance. Reflecting on his early life, he says, “church was a refuge for me. Um, it was the only place that I felt totally loved and completely accepted. Um, and I liked empty churches because then I could have God all to myself.” Another practice is prayer. He says, “now one of my collections are different kinds of prayer books and so depending on what my mood is, I’ll say the prayer in Spanish, the Anglican tradition, Roman tradition, I’ll do the feminist—I have feminist prayer books, I’ll, so I’ve always been religious and spiritual. I pray four times a day.” He also uses symbols in his personal spiritual practices. He says, “I have a mezuzah on my door that I kiss every morning before I leave.” Yoga is an important spiritual practice as well. This respondent, who shared that he is HIV positive, says, “because the yoga puts me in touch with what has happened to my body living with HIV and having all these medications.” And finally, he says he uses practices tied to Native American culture: “I let my religious traditions sneak in here and because Mexicans have a lot of Indian ancestry, I draw on a lot of Native American traditions.” This serves as a reminder of the sometimes strong connections between a person’s spirituality and a person’s culture.

This practitioner talks about his use of spirituality in his personal life as being something integrated rather than compartmentalized; in other words, it isn’t so easy to parse the spirituality piece out and talk about it outside of a holistic context. For him,
spirituality is part of his lifestyle, going back to childhood. He says, “my father, ah, a
typical Latino man, was very religious as a Roman Catholic. My mother was a member
of the Church of England and very religious and my grandmother—my father’s mother—
was very religious. Um and so, religiosity and spirituality had always been a part of my
life in that.” He also describes the practice of social work itself as contributing to his
personal spiritual growth. In this way, the work itself is understood as a spiritual
endeavor, as a way for the individual practitioner to find meaning and purpose in his or
her own life. He says, “And you know the things that my clients struggle with do impact
my own sort of spirituality. Um, you know like um, a Buddhist mantra is toward this step,
toward enlightenment is, you now realize that you and every living being will die and is
thus deserving of mercy and compassion.”
Chapter 7: Conclusions

Building on research conducted over the past 20 years, I attempt in this study to explore three specific aspects of the integration of spirituality and social work practice: how social work practitioners understand and define the term spirituality; how social workers see and experience the fit between spirituality and professional social work; and how practitioners say they use spirituality and its related concepts in the social work practice context. I use the phrase “practice context” in this study to help practitioners think broadly about how they use spirituality, not just when working directly with client systems, but even how practitioners might use spirituality in their own developmental process. For the purposes of this study, I define “practice context” as all of the facets that contribute to our work with clients, including: the practitioner (ourselves), the client, the relationship between ourselves and the client, the agency under which the services are provided, supervisory relationships, and the social work profession, particularly ethical mandates.

Although informed by previous research on the topic of spirituality and social work, this study is different. It follows a grounded theory framework for data collection and data analysis. While much of the literature explores this topic using survey methodology in which respondents are asked to select from preconceived definitions of spirituality and lists of spiritually-based interventions, I ask respondents to supply their own definitions of spirituality, to offer their own perceptions of the fit between spirituality and professional social work, and to describe how they think they use spirituality in the practice context. A qualitative approach to research allows respondents to give voice to their own experiences and assumes that respondents themselves are
experts on how to make sense of spirituality as it relates to social work practice. In fact, several practitioners expressed gratitude to me at the end of our interview for giving them an opportunity to think out loud about and give voice to an issue that is very important to them; participation in the study itself was, for some, a profound experience. Coholic (2001) noted a similar response from participants in her qualitative study of spirituality and feminist social work: “participants stress how taking part in this research process helped them articulate, understand and advance their thinking about spirituality in social work” (p. 231).

Using a snowball sampling technique, I recruited social work practitioners (n=20) to participate in a face-to-face meeting with me during which I gained written informed consent, collected demographic information, and administered an interview using a semi-structured protocol. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed, and then coded for themes with the help of ATLAS-Ti software. During data analysis, several shared themes around each of the three research questions began to emerge. These common themes were then grouped together into higher-level categories that begin to explain how social work practitioners understand and utilize spirituality in the practice context. For each research question, I offer a grounded theory explanation.

The emergent themes, considered to be characteristic of this group of respondents, are validated in several ways. The primary support for these findings is in the robustness of the data. Once initial themes were identified, further interviews were used to test and refine the concepts. After eight interviews, a master codebook was developed after initial codes assigned by me were confirmed by a second coder. The remaining 12 interviews were coded using the master list, with very few new codes created. After the 20th
interview, I decided that saturation of the data categories had been sufficiently reached. The findings were well-grounded in the data, as demonstrated by the density and richness of the sample quotations selected from practitioner narratives.

Summary of Findings

*How Social Workers Define Spirituality*

I first wondered how social work practitioners define the term *spirituality* using their own words. In my review of the literature both in social work and in related professions, such as nursing and medicine, I found that spirituality is defined in many different ways. In fact, how spirituality is defined varies even from one research study to another, and these variations can sometimes be inconsistent. This poses a challenge in that one characteristic of good research is a study’s ability to be replicated. For example, spirituality is defined as “relationships between and among self, others, a higher power, and the universe” (Canda, 1988); as a relationship to the transcendent (Bullis, 1996); encompassing the sacred (Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, 2007); shaped in a communal context (Hodge, 2000); and the quest for meaning and purpose (Canda, 1988; Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, 2007), to name a few. Another challenge is how clearly the concepts under investigation are explicated and how broadly embraced by others are those explications. In essence, many of the studies on spirituality cannot be compared to each other because how spirituality is defined and measured is not standard.

The data suggests the ontological position that spirituality does, indeed, exist. From a philosophical perspective, however, there are a couple of ways to describe the “it” of spirituality: as metaphysical yet non-substantive and as humanly-constructed. The practitioners in this study speak to both. First, spirituality is “a nontemporal dimension of
existence” (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008, p. 109) and thus requires belief and/or faith; spirituality cannot be measured, described, and “proven” using traditional scientific methods in the same way that other concepts can. In other words, this particular understanding of spirituality “assumes the existence of a transcendent reality” (Hodge & Derezotes, p. 109). Spirituality, then, becomes “real” in each person’s lived experience of it. In this way, spirituality is humanly-constructed in terms of how it is understood and clarified through each individual’s perspective. This finding suggests continued attempts to understand, in depth, how spirituality is experienced by people as an important aspect of the quest to define and measure spirituality.

I also wondered if there is an understanding of spirituality that is distinct to social work; in other words, is there something in the idea of spirituality that comes close to “common” within the profession and among social work practitioners? To explore this idea, I asked respondents to describe someone who they consider to be a spiritual person and to specifically offer their definition of what spirituality is. The findings suggest that spirituality, as a concept, is easier to describe (as in the context of a spiritual person) than it is to define. Defining spirituality results in more abstract renderings. Also, social work professionals seem to convey a particular openness to thinking about spirituality in various ways. Perhaps the idea of integrating spirituality into practice seems natural to social workers because we have been trained to be client-focused, to think from a systems perspective, to understand human behavior using integrated frameworks, and to participate in a life-long self-reflection process. Perhaps social workers are more comfortable with notions of spirituality that don’t fit nicely into narrowly-focused categories. Perhaps our legacy of promoting social justice and empowerment paves the
way for legitimizing alternate ways of knowing, such as spirituality. The findings also suggest the practice of social work itself, described by respondents as spiritual in nature, provides a common experience among practitioners that shapes our understanding of spirituality.

I added a demographic dimension to this question by posing the thought that perhaps how practitioners define spirituality would be different based on age, which accounts for the developmental nature of spirituality, and would be different based on religiosity, which accounts for the role of religion and religious concepts in how people understand spirituality. Overall, however, there were no major differences in how respondents define spirituality based on age and religiosity. While spiritual development theories suggest that as people age and integrate more life experiences, their understanding of spirituality changes, I speculate that perhaps not a lot of differences emerged here based on age because respondents all experienced events, particularly in their professional work, that would foster the need to think about and make sense of them from a spiritual perspective. Indeed, this was part of the thinking behind recruiting practitioners with three or more years of post-MSW experience. I speculate that there were few differences based on religiosity because of the training in diversity and self-awareness received through social work education. While religious respondents used God-language more specifically, they were able, in most cases, to own their religious perspectives and not put those out there as universal perspectives.

After the narratives were reduced to 267 quotations, those quotations were then coded; these codes were grouped into 24 themes, and these themes combined to ten
higher-level categories. I then used these ten categories to lay a grounded-theory framework for understanding how social work practitioners define the term *spirituality*.

Practitioners confirm the inherent difficulty in defining *spirituality*, noting that it’s one thing to use the term regularly and assume to know what it means, but another thing altogether to be asked to put those assumptions into words. Practitioners express this difficulty as confounded in three ways. First, the *role of religion* in our societal context impacts the way we define spirituality. While religion and spirituality are not necessarily the same thing, the concepts are very much connected for a lot of people. And for many, it’s easier to define religion. While it’s important to separate the two terms, there is some danger, too. The first is the danger of labeling spirituality as “good” and religion as “bad.” This is not particularly helpful or accurate in a context where a majority of people identify with a particular religion. Yet not everyone identifies with religion, but perhaps can identify with themes of connecting to something beyond ourselves and meaning-making. According to Frankl (1984), meaning-making is a universal spiritual endeavor. Another danger is ignoring religion altogether as an important concept in social work. Religion is one path towards exploring and understanding spirituality; religion provides specific frameworks for defining spirituality and a communal environment for such explorations. As Derezotes and Evans (1995) propose, social work education and practice should recognize both the varieties of spiritual and religious experiences and expressions.

Second, spirituality is *defined individually* and can mean different things to different people. Practitioners were a bit reluctant to offer just one definition, even when I asked specifically what spirituality means to them. Third, practitioners suggest that spirituality takes on different meanings depending on how you understand the *nature of*
spirituality. In other words, is spirituality a developmental process? Is spirituality the core of what it means to be human? Does everyone have the capacity to be spiritual? While respondents did not fully answer this question, underlying a definition of spirituality is an assumption about the nature of spirituality. Carroll (2001) suggests that both spirituality as a dimension and spirituality as the core of human existence permeate the literature. The data suggests that each person has the capacity to be spiritual, and spirituality can be nurtured in a variety of ways over the course of a person’s development. Some people may be disconnected from or less connected to their spirituality, which could be a potential growth area for clients if they are interested in pursuing this. I then wonder about how well nurturing spiritual development fits in with the social work role.

It is important for social worker practitioners to evaluate what it means for the helping relationship if spirituality is present (in the client, in the practitioner, or both) and to emphasize spirituality as a broad term, meaning different things to different people. It is also important to recognize that someone may not even use the term spirituality to describe their experiences of wholeness and connectedness.

Practitioners more easily define spirituality when asked to provide specific descriptors of spiritual people. Respondents provide several important characteristics of spiritual people, which include, but are not limited to: living simply, consistent, centered, loving, motivating, accepting, and nonjudgmental. These attributes describe what spirituality “looks like.” Spirituality is also behavioral, as seen by the actions of spiritual people. For example, spiritual people meditate, go to church, participate in spiritual rituals, and respond to life situations based on their spiritual beliefs. And spirituality is a
state of being, as exemplified by the lives of spiritual people. Being with spiritual people elicits feelings of comfort, safety, and peace.

When practitioners begin to define spirituality more abstractly, their definitions are varied, coming together under the theme of multidimensionality. Some of these dimensions include ideas of community, connection, culture, hope, nature, and having faith, to name a few. This finding confirms the complexity of spirituality and suggests that spirituality is most fully understood through the richness of its dimensions. Finally, several practitioners offer broad definitions of spirituality which emphasize meaning-making and purpose in life. These broader definitions are an attempt to integrate the many complex aspects of spirituality into a succinct and generalizable understanding. Meaning-making and purpose in life are legitimate conceptualizations found in the literature.

How Social Workers Understand the Fit Between Spirituality and Professional Social Work

Next, I asked practitioners to talk about the fit between spirituality and social work, particularly in light of professional mandates and agency contexts. In what ways are spirituality and social work compatible? After all, social work was founded on religious principles and the first social workers were women who felt compelled by their faith to help others (Leighninger, 2000). The core values of the social work profession mirror the values of many of the major religious traditions. What are some of the inherent challenges in integrating the two? We live in a context where the separation of church and state is a highly valued principle, yet we see a blurring of church and state lines on a regular basis (Cnaan, 1999). While sectarian agencies may encourage practitioners and
clients to explore spirituality in their work together, social workers in other types of agencies may feel limited in their ability to integrate spirituality into practice. And as a secular profession, is there inherent conflict with the inclusion of spirituality from the perspective of social work values and ethics? (Canda, Mitsuko, and Furman, 2004).

After the narratives were reduced to 111 quotations, those quotations were then coded; these codes were grouped into 11 themes, and these themes combined to eight higher-level categories. I then used these eight categories to lay a grounded-theory framework for understanding how social workers perceive the fit between spirituality and professional social work.

The tensions experienced by social workers in integrating spirituality and social work practice are clearly demonstrated throughout the narratives. Respondents navigate when and how to integrate spirituality through number of different lenses. The first perspective acknowledges the philosophical underpinnings of social work—we learn about social work primarily through a positivistic, medical perspective that emphasizes the scientific method and can seem at odds with the ontological assumptions of the spiritual perspective. Spirituality cannot fully be understood using only scientific ways of knowing; as discussed earlier, the data suggests that spirituality is both metaphysical and humanly-constructed. On the other hand, practitioners easily identify their practice frameworks of choice and demonstrate how spirituality naturally fits into those frameworks. Systems theory, bio-psycho-social theory, person-in-environment, diversity, and “starting where the client is” each provide space for the exploration of spirituality in the work done by these practitioners.
Challenges to the integration of spirituality and social work practice include the church/state issue and concern that the social work profession itself isn’t willing to fully embrace spirituality and religion. Practitioners emphasize possible tensions between personal and professional values and the importance of engaging in on-going self-awareness about personal biases. Both Carroll (2001) and Coholic (2001) urge a more serious engagement of social workers in this kind of process, beginning early in a person’s educational program. The spirituality of the client is an important consideration in integrating spirituality, taking the time to really find out what role spirituality plays, if any, in the client’s worldview. Social work values and ethics dictate how decisions are made when a dilemma occurs.

While practitioners tend to feel that spirituality and social work are a good fit in most circumstances, there are situations in which spirituality does not fit into social work practice, such as when clients are not interested in exploring spirituality, when the practitioner is trying to proselytize, or when clients are actively hallucinating or delusional. For those practitioners who describe social work itself as spiritual, the work of meeting clients in their most vulnerable moments and offering a sense of hope for a better future is viewed as sacred. According to Frankl (1984), one of the ways people make meaning (in this case, social work practitioners) is in doing a work or a deed. Another way to describe this idea is that of meaningful work. These practitioners acknowledge the ways in which they, too, are changed when assisting clients in a change process. According to Walsh (1999), therapeutic relationships are, in essence, spiritual because they foster personal transformation, wholeness, and connection to others.
How Social Workers Say They Use Spirituality in the Practice Context

I wondered how social work practitioners use spirituality in the practice context, hoping that respondents would think broadly about this idea. It’s one thing to say spirituality is important and to say that it’s appropriate to integrate spirituality into practice, and another thing altogether to actually apply those sentiments. Would practitioners offer a wide variety of ideas on how they use spirituality in practice (Sheridan, 2004; Gilligan & Furness, 2006)? I also wondered about the role of spirituality in the lives of the practitioners. Do people who use spirituality with clients also use it in their own lives, and to what extent do those overlap? I wondered if practitioners would view social work practice as a cyclical process in which the spirituality, both of the client and the practitioner, impacts practice and the practice itself, in turn, impacts spirituality (Singletary, 2005).

Practitioners talked about using spirituality in two distinct ways: when directly working with clients and in their personal lives. After the narratives were reduced to 231 quotations, those quotations were then coded; these codes were grouped into 15 themes describing how social workers use spirituality with clients. After the narratives were reduced to 78 quotations, those quotations were then coded; these codes were grouped into seven themes describing how social workers use spirituality in personal ways. I then used these categories to lay a grounded-theory framework for understanding how social workers use spirituality in the practice context.

Practitioners use spirituality directly with clients throughout the social work practice process: relationship-building, intake, assessment, intervention, and termination. What spirituality looks like within the context of practice can range from asking clients
whether spirituality is important in their lives to suggesting specific interventions that are spiritually-based to participating in rituals with clients when terminating. Practitioners are more likely to use spirituality with specific client issues, such as addictions and loss; within the context of specific therapeutic frameworks, such as narrative therapy; when using spirituality in a particular context is within the boundaries of the social worker role, as opposed to clients seeking spiritual direction; and when using spirituality is client-driven. There are times when using spirituality with clients is deemed not appropriate, such as with clients who are actively delusional.

In their personal lives, practitioners identify a number of spiritual practices they engage in, including church attendance, prayer, spiritual readings, and yoga. Many practitioners believe the essence of who they are is tied to spirituality; in this way, practitioners must be careful when using spirituality with clients to separate their own values and beliefs from those of the client. This is one way in which how practitioners use spirituality in their personal lives directly overlaps with how they use spirituality with clients. Another way the two overlap is in the perception of beneficial outcomes associated with spirituality; practitioners offer a number of specific examples of how clients benefited from the integration of spirituality into treatment, and also offer a number of specific example of how they, themselves, benefit from cultivating a personal spirituality.

The idea of social work as spiritual in and of itself comes up again here, when practitioners talk about how engaging in the lives of clients who are trying to make meaning out of suffering is a spiritual experience that simultaneously helps us fulfill our
own meaning and purpose in life. In this way, practitioners “use” their work as a means of personal spiritual growth.

The data suggests that, as self-reported, social work practitioners incorporate spirituality into the generic social work process, beginning with intake and moving through termination, when appropriate. Whether spirituality is integrated into the work with a particular client depends on the client; if spirituality is identified early in the process as meaningful and important to the client, then practitioners will explore spirituality more in-depth during assessment, and incorporate spirituality into treatment planning, including the utilization of spiritually-based interventions with clients in face-to-face meetings and in suggestions for client tasks that occur between meetings.

It is important to note here that these practitioners are integrating spirituality in the practice context even though they did not receive formal training in how to do so through formal social work education. While it’s true that asking a spirituality and/or religion question is standard on many intake forms, and resources do exist for help in the assessment process, little information is available on what spiritually-based interventions are, how they are carried out consistently, and what the effectiveness of the various interventions are. Canda, Mitsuko, & Furman (2004) found mixed views among respondents about the appropriateness of several spiritually-oriented activities, some of which were reported as being used by the group of practitioners interviewed for this study.

Discussion and Implications

Because this was an exploratory investigation, my conclusions must be viewed as tentative; however, to the extent that these findings are supported, there are implications
for social work research, education, and practice. Spirituality as a concept defies easy definition; this is an inherent challenge to the scientific study of spirituality. Keeping in mind that practitioners more easily talked about spirituality in the context of describing spiritual people, perhaps researchers should consider asking the deeper, existential questions of respondents without using the nebulous, and perhaps less meaningful, term *spirituality*. In other words, spirituality as a concept is perhaps describable but not definable. Perhaps spirituality is a meta-concept made up of various related concepts that stand on their own but, when considered together, provide a totality.

Another issue is the challenge for social work education in giving time and space in the curriculum to adequately address spirituality and religion. Generalist textbooks provide, at best, summary information about important content and would have limited space for thorough coverage. Social work educational requirements already mandate the inclusion of a large amount of important content across the curriculum; it would be difficult in most programs to provide more than a cursory coverage of spirituality and religion content. However, the most salient finding related to social work education emerging from the data points to the importance of self-awareness in the process of integrating spirituality and social work practice. Respondents emphasize that practitioners should own their own understandings of what spirituality is, allow the integration of spirituality and practice to be client-driven, and be careful to separate personal values from professional values.

Perhaps one thing that social work education could do better is creating opportunities for social work students to begin to examine their own spiritualities, recognize conflicting values, and acknowledge potential biases. Some practitioners may
be uncomfortable in integrating spirituality into practice because of their own negative experiences related to spirituality and/or religion. It is difficult to embrace something we are uncomfortable with or ambivalent about. Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson (1994) found that faculty who felt personally positive towards religion and spirituality were more likely to be supportive of integrating spirituality into social work. Canda (1988) believes that personal cultivation of spirituality can go hand in hand with the application of social work knowledge and skill. Coholic (2001) argues for emphasizing how personal values of the practitioner impact his or her practice. The main goal here would be to foster in practitioners a level of comfort in owning their own spirituality, or lack of it, in order to assess the potential impact that could have on the practice context.

The integration of spirituality into social work practice is not without challenges. Currently, there are few practice models that are specifically spiritually-based (Coholic, 2001). However, several generalist frameworks for understanding human behavior already being taught in social work education programs offer space for integrating spirituality; it is not as if spirituality as a concept is completely incompatible with current social work perspective. Respondents, when describing how spirituality fits with professional social work practice, identified their own preferred theoretical framework and included spirituality as part of that particular framework.

Another interesting finding for discussion is the idea that social work, for many respondents, is described as a vocation rather than a career. Many use the language of “calling.” Framing social work practice as “meaningful work” could help foster lifelong commitment and connection to the profession; social work framed as a spiritual practice is energizing rather than depleting. In fact, I began the interview protocol with a couple
of questions designed to get respondents comfortable with the interview setting and ease them into the research questions. The first question I asked is to tell me the story of how they became a social worker, including people, places, and events that impacted that choice. While I did not initially include this idea of becoming a social worker as part of the research questions for this study, some very interesting themes related to this topic emerged from the data.

Several respondents speak directly about feeling “called” to social work or about the natural “fit” of social work for who they are as people; the idea that social work is what they should be doing. For example, one practitioner says, “And I felt drawn to it, and I sort of felt like I had a calling to sort of do that kind of work.” Another says, “I think I was born to do this work.” Another says, “I come out of a sort of Franciscan spiritual tradition of preferential treatment for the poor and the social justice commitments were to it. It (social work) was a perfect fit.”

Other respondents emphasize that their entrée into social work was set in the context of wanting to help others solve their problems. One practitioner says, “I always knew I wanted to help people, but I just didn't know to what extent.” Another says, “I have some things that I wanna help people in my own way so I guess it led me that way. It was a way to really help people.”

Finally, some respondents talk about the need to be engaged in work that is meaningful. One practitioner decided that working for an insurance company was not something she could do long-term. She says, “I needed to do something that felt more meaningful. So, how I integrated spirituality into my life, in part, is having chosen this field. It cuts across choices in terms of with who my friendships are, who I choose to
spend my time with, how I treat them.” Another says, “I felt like I had come to kind of a dead-end street and I wanted something more meaningful in my life other than being a private secretary.” And another practitioner who changed careers says, “I worked at, continued to work in advertising but it started to become clear to me that what I, that what would be most meaningful was work where I was genuinely helping someone with what they felt was most deeply meaningful to them in life.”

In this study, practitioners demonstrate that they, despite receiving little to no formal training in most cases, find themselves using spirituality in the practice context, mainly because such integration is client-driven. How spirituality is used in the practice context varies as widely as how spirituality is defined, and how practitioners classify “spiritually-based interventions” is as varied. Although some work has been done in terms of developing guidelines for integrating spirituality in the assessment process, fewer studies explore practice guidelines for use in describing and using spiritually-based interventions.

The fact that practitioners use spirituality both with clients and in their personal lives further emphasizes the fact that the practitioner is not neutral in the client-worker relationship. We bring who we are to the table. It makes sense to assume that people who self-identify as being able to define spirituality and use it in the practice context would describe spirituality as beneficial and would have a certain level of comfort in its use. This might not be the case with other practitioners. An excellent follow-up study of practitioners who don’t self-identify as being able to define spirituality or who say they don’t use spirituality in practice would shed more light on this. I do suspect, however,
that many of the themes would be similar between the two groups, although respondents in the second group might not explicitly use *spirituality* as a context for their narratives.

**Strengths and Limitations of Study**

One strength of this study is the use of a qualitative methodology, designed to capture the experiences of social work practitioners in their own words. I chose grounded theory specifically because this type of design approaches the topic with the idea of letting theory emerge from the data rather than offering particular theories at the outset of the study. In light of criticism in the literature around inconsistency and a wide array of diversity in defining spirituality, I felt compelled to let social workers define spirituality in hopes of honing in on a definition most appropriate for use in social work.

The semi-structured interview protocol was successful in guiding participants through a discussion that focused on the research questions at hand, yet did so in a way that allowed participants the freedom to respond to questions in ways that were meaningful to them, rather than being asked to fit their responses into pre-established categories. I did my best to avoid asking leading questions, but was able to redirect participants using specific probes when necessary.

Another strength of this study is the sample. I recruited a rather homogenous sample: all MSWs primarily from the Boston area currently in practice who can define spirituality and who say they use spirituality in practice. Yet I captured some level of diversity on certain demographics, increasing generalizability to some extent: age, years of experience, religiosity, and racial and ethnic identity. The overall sample size (n=20) is rather large for this type of study. The richness and depth of the data provides many paths for further research.
As with all research, this study has its limitations. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited specifically to this particular group of respondents. Replicating the study with other groups of practitioners would increase generalizability, as would designing and implementing a quantitative study based on these findings to be used with larger sample sizes.

A second limitation of this study has to do with the way I tried to measure practitioner religiosity. Although I received advice from experts in the field that asking a question about attendance at houses of worship is a reliable indicator of whether someone is religious or not, I am not convinced that I really captured what I intended to capture. For example, my sample was pretty evenly divided in terms of religious or nonreligious according to how often respondents attended church, temple, or synagogue; however, with the exception of one, every respondent identified having a Judeo-Christian background. In this case, it is fair to say that being brought up in this particular religious tradition is sure to impact the way a person views spirituality, despite a person’s current religious practices. I would like to have had more variety in terms of religious traditions as well as people with no connection to any religious tradition. Also, some respondents who don’t attend church, synagogue, or temple on a regular basis, and therefore are classified here as nonreligious, talk about participating in many other religious practices. This leads me to think they might self-identify as religious, even if they don’t attend a house of worship on a regular basis.

Another limitation is that I only recruited practitioners who are sympathetic to the topic of spirituality and how it relates to social work practice. What about those practitioners who are not able to define spirituality or say they do not use spirituality in
practice? Their narratives would likely add a different perspective to the overall findings of this study. Recruiting this particular sample might be a good next step in my inquiry. Also, these findings are based on self-report in terms of using spirituality in the practice context. There is no way to know whether practitioners really do what they say they do unless I could confirm this based on evaluating practitioners’ case notes or interviewing clients.

Finally, a grounded theory approach to data analysis has its own limitations. One critique of grounded theory describes the technique as a “reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems” (Charmaz, 2000). In other words, grounded theory fractures the data in such a way that it might not provide a full picture of the subjects’ experience of spirituality and social work practice. Other qualitative methods, such as narrative analysis, might offer a less aggregated understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusions

In this exploratory, grounded-theory study, I analyzed transcripts of narratives derived from semi-structured interviews with social work practitioners primarily from the Boston area. The purpose of the study was to develop a theoretical framework for understanding how social work practitioners conceptualize and utilize spirituality in the practice context. Continuing to bring spirituality out of the margins and into the mainstream is a secondary benefit of this study.

Spirituality is an important topic for social work research, education, and practice. I believe there is much room for continued research in this area as we attempt to refine conclusions about the use of spirituality as a concept, how spirituality is utilized in the practice context, and how potential challenges in integrating spirituality into social work
practice are resolved. This research agenda suggests the importance of collaboration with other professions, including religious scholars, who are asking similar questions and seeking similar answers. Buying into the theory that spirituality is a universal human experience, the stage is set for a truly interdisciplinary research agenda.

While research on spirituality in the social work profession includes samples of social work students, faculty, and practitioners, clients have not yet been given ample voice. Further research could include clients and their perspectives, although implementing such designs are often more difficult. Most importantly, social workers need to develop more awareness of their own spirituality and how it may impact the practice environment. Cultivation of the spiritual aspects of social workers’ “call” to meaningful work offers a potential avenue through which to counter burnout.

I am grateful for the opportunity to dialogue with so many thoughtful practitioners about this important topic. I personally was stretched to expand my thinking beyond my own perspectives on spirituality through listening to and contemplating their varied insights and experiences.
Are you a social work practitioner with an MSW?

Have you been working in the field for at least 3 years post-MSW?

Does the topic of spirituality and social work practice intrigue you?

Are you interested in participating in a research study exploring social work practitioners’ understanding and experiences of spirituality in practice?

Ph.D. student is looking for volunteers meeting the above criteria who are willing to be interviewed.

For more information, please contact:
Stacey L. Barker
(617) 745-3564
slb40@case.edu
Appendix B
Inclusion Criteria Questionnaire

1. What is your level of education? Please check all that apply.
   - _____ BSW
   - _____ MSW
   - _____ Advanced standing

2. How many years of post-MSW experience do you have? _____

3. How old are you? _____

4. Are you affiliated with a particular religious tradition? Yes   No
   If yes, which one? ________________________________
   Do you attend church, synagogue, or temple more than twice a month?
   Yes (religious) No (nonreligious)

5. When you hear the word “spirituality,” do you have a clear idea of what that means? Could you describe what spirituality is to others?

6. Have you ever utilized spirituality in your social work practice context?

Respondents will be excluded from the study if:
- They do not have a Masters degree in social work.
- They do not have at least 3 years of post-MSW experience.
- They aren’t able to self-report that they have formulated ways of thinking about and practicing spirituality in their work.
- They fulfill a religious/nonreligious and age group category that already has enough participants. I need 7 or 8 religious, younger participants, 7 or 8 older, religious participants, 7 or 8 younger, nonreligious participants, and 7 or 8 older, nonreligious participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Nonreligious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger than age 40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 40 or older</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
How Social Work Practitioners Think About and Utilize Spirituality in The Practice Context

You are being asked to participate in a research study about how social work practitioners make sense of spirituality and how they use spirituality in practice. You were identified as a possible participant either by the researcher, by colleagues, or you self-identified as someone with interest in this topic. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate. This study is being conducted by researchers at Case Western Reserve University.

Purpose of the Study

Specifically, this study aims to explore how social work practitioners conceptualize spirituality and how they use spirituality in the practice context. I hope the findings of this study will move the profession towards more clarity in how we define spirituality and, in turn, improve social work education and practice.

Procedures

As a participant in this research study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Sign two (2) copies of this consent form. You will keep one for your records.
2. Complete a brief Demographic Information Questionnaire designed to provide me with some background information about you and your practice context.
3. Participate in a two-hour personal interview with me at a location that is mutually acceptable to both of us. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your understanding of what spirituality is, your career as a social worker, and experiences you have had both personally and professionally related to spirituality.
4. Allow me to audiotape the interview so that it can be transcribed and analyzed by a small team of researchers.

Re-contacting for Future Study

In the event that the researcher(s) wish to conduct a follow-up study that further explores your understanding and experiences of spirituality in the practice context, we would like to inform you of the new study. By checking the appropriate box below, you agree/disagree that if the researchers start a new study of how social work practitioners understand and experience spirituality in the practice context, you can be contacted and informed about the new study. If you do not want to be re-contacted about a future study, it does not exclude you from participating in this study.
Risks and Benefits to Being in the Study

This study is expected to create minimal risk.

There are no direct benefits to participants except furthering our knowledge in the area of spirituality and social work could have implications for improved education and practice.

Compensation

You will receive no payment/reimbursement for your participation in this study.

Confidentiality

The records of this research will be kept private. They will be kept in a locked file and any report we publish will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Access to research records will normally be limited to those on the research team. However, the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the research records to ensure that the rights of human subjects are being adequately protected. The audiotapes of the transcripts will be maintained in the same manner as the records, with the same restricted access. These tapes will be destroyed 3 years after the last publication.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University or with Eastern Nazarene College. There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not participating or for discontinuing your participation.

Contacts and Questions

The researchers conducting this study are Jerry Floersch, Ph.D., and Stacey L. Barker, MSW, LICSW. You may ask questions now, and if you have any questions later, you may contact the researchers at:

Jerry Floersch, Ph.D.
Case Western Reserve University
Phone: (216) 368-5589
e-mail: jerry.floersch@case.edu

Stacey L. Barker, MSW, LICSW
Case Western Reserve University and Eastern Nazarene College
Phone: (617) 745-3564
e-mail: slb40@case.edu
If you would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) about: (1) concerns regarding this study, (2) research participant rights, (3) research-related injuries, or (4) other human subjects issues, please contact Case Western Reserve University’s Institutional Review Board at (216) 368-6925 or write: Case Western Reserve University; Institutional Review Board; 10900 Euclid Ave.; Cleveland, OH 44106-7230.

_____ I agree to be re-contacted about a future study of how social work practitioners understand and experience spirituality in the practice context.

_____ I do not want to be re-contacted about a future study of how social work practitioners understand and experience spirituality in the practice context.

_____________________________________________          ___________________
Signed                                      Date
Appendix D

Demographic Information Questionnaire

1. What is your level of education? Please check all that apply.
   _____ BSW
   _____ MSW
   _____ Advanced standing

2. As part of your social work education, how were you exposed to the topic of spirituality? Please check all that apply.
   _____ I was not exposed to this topic through my social work education.
   _____ The topic of spirituality was integrated in several different courses.
   _____ I took a specific course on this topic.

3. How many years of post-MSW experience do you have? _____

4. How old are you? _____

5. What is your race? ________________

6. What is your gender? ___________

7. Are you affiliated with a particular religious tradition? Yes  No
   If yes, which one? __________________________________________________________
   Do you attend church, synagogue, or temple more than twice a month? Yes  No

8. What is your current practice setting? _________________________________

9. How long have you worked in your current practice setting? _____

10. Please describe your agency context.
    Is your agency sectarian?  Yes  No
    Is your agency private or public? __________
Is your agency for-profit or non-profit? ___________________

What is your primary area of practice? ___________________

Do you work primarily with:

_____ individuals and/or families

_____ groups

_____ organizations and/or communities

11. Why are you interested in participating in this study?
Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. When you hear the word “spirituality,” what does it mean to you?
   Probe: How would you describe it to someone who is hearing the word for the first time?

2. Tell me about your own spiritual journey. What experiences have contributed to your current understanding of what spirituality is?
   Probe: Are there people, places, events, books that have been influential?

3. Think of someone who you would consider to be a “spiritual” person. How would you describe this person? What is it like for you to know this person?

4. Tell me the story of how you became a social worker.
   Probe: Why did you decide on this career? Were there people, places, events, experiences that influenced your choice?

5. Tell me about your experience in integrating spirituality into your practice context. When were you successful? Unsuccessful? When have you experienced tension or barriers?
   Probe: Is your agency supportive? Do you discuss spiritual matters in supervision? Are there issues with the separation of church and state?

6. When has your understanding of spirituality really helped facilitate your work with a client? Why do you think it did?

7. When has your understanding of spirituality seemed to discourage or inhibit your work with a client? Why do you think it did?
8. Tell me about a time when spiritual issues were a primary focus in your work with a client.

Probe: Was there a time when a client specifically expressed a spiritual concern? How did you handle that?

9. Can you give me other examples where you might have used spirituality in assessment, progress notes, intervention, and termination?

10. Are there times when you think using spirituality is not appropriate? When do you think it is most appropriate?

Probe: Do you see any ethical concerns about integrating spirituality into social work practice?

11. What else would you like me to know about your experiences related to spirituality?
Appendix F

How Social Work Practitioners Understand and Experience Spirituality in the Practice Context

Initial Coding Strategy

The coding strategy for this project is centered around the three main research questions.

1. Similarities and differences in the representation of spirituality among social workers. This questions gets at definition and conceptualization of spirituality. What do practitioners say it is?

   • Code: isit_

   • This should include any reference to how spirituality is understood and defined by participants.

2. Use of spirituality by social work practitioners in the “practice context.” This means the ways in which spirituality is used specifically with clients and in more personal ways.

   • Code: useit_clients. This should include any reference to using spirituality or related concepts as it is used in actual social work practice.

   • Code: useit_self: This should include any reference to spirituality or related concepts as it is used by the social work practitioner in his or her own life.

3. The fit between spirituality and professional social work, including agency contexts.

   • Code: fit_
• This should include any reference to congruence, incongruence, integration, struggles, challenges, what social work is, etc.

There is also the possibility that other larger ideas, or codes, are inherent in the narratives. One such idea, based on the way questions were asked in the interview protocol, is how people became social workers.

• Code: became_

• This should include all references to how and why people chose this profession.
Appendix G
Master Code Book

Code-Filter: All

HU: Spirituality_and_Social_Work_SB_07_03_07
File: [C:\Documents and Settings\Stacey Barker\My Documents\Spirituality_and_Social_Work_SB_07_03_07.hpr5]
Edited by: Super
Date/Time: 07/09/07 10:24:19 AM

!female
!male
!nonreligious
!older
!religious
!younger

became_calling/fit
became_events
became_help people
became_life experiences
became_meaningful work
became_other influence
became_practical
became_previous experience
became_related field

fit_challenges
fit_impt for client
fit_maybe
fit_no
fit_separate self
fit_sw as spiritual
fit_vs. science
fit_yes

isit_accepting
isit_accountability
isit_authenticity
isit_behavioral
isit_beliefs
isit_buzz word
isit_centering
isit_Christlikeness
isit_communal
isit_connection
isit_consistency
isit_core
isit_cultural
isit_depends on person
isit_developmental
isit_devout
isit_disciplined
isit_energy
isit_fate
isit_feeling safe
isit_forgiveness_
isit_gentleness
isit_going to church
isit_hard to describe
isit_having a good spirit
isit_having faith
isit_higher power
isit_hope
isit_human side
isit_like dreamwork
isit_love and service
isit_meaning-making
isit_meditation
isit_motivating
isit_nature
isit_not good
isit_not judgmental
isit_not religion
isit_peace
isit_prayerful
isit_purpose in life
isit_relationship with God
isit_relationships_ it is more of a relationship
isit_religion and spirituality connect
isit_rituals
isit_secular humanism
isit_self-realized
isit_simple living
isit_something everyone has

useit_clients_assessment
useit_clients_conversations
useit_clients_definition
useit_clients_empowerment
useit_clients_grief work
useit_clients_clients engaged in behaviors againsttheir religious beliefs
useit_clients_intake
useit_clients_intervention
useit_clients_intervention/art
useit_clients_intervention/CBT
useit_clients_intervention/connecting
useit_clients_intervention/deep breathing
useit_clients_intervention/faith communities
useit_clients_intervention/journaling
useit_clients_intervention/mind/body work
useit_clients_intervention/prayer
useit_clients_intervention/readings
useit_clients_intervention/referrals
useit_clients_intervention/rituals
useit_clients_intervention/strengths
useit_clients_intervention/supports
useit_clients_intervention/symbols
useit_clients_intervention/understanding self
useit_clients_intervention/use of self
useit_clients_intervention/using God
useit_clients_issues
useit_clients_mystery
useit_clients_narrative styles of therapy are receptive to spirituality
useit_clients_necessary
useit_clients_not useful
useit_clients_outcomes
useit_clients_part_of_practice
useit_clients_separate_self
useit_clients_social_worker_role
useit_clients_work_with_clergy_who_are_having_spiritual_difficulties
useit_clients_spiritual_frameworks
useit_clients_termination
useit_clients_trauma_work
useit_clients_where_client_is
useit_clients_worker_client_relationship

useit_self_a_path_of_life_experiences
useit_self_benefits
useit_self_Buddhist_practices
useit_self_connecting_to_others
useit_self_going_to_church
useit_self_grieving
useit_self_higher_power
useit_self_identity
useit_self_journaling
useit_self_lifestyle
useit_self_mind/body_work
useit_self_Native_American_practices
useit_self_not_useful
useit_self_prayer
useit_self_readings
useit_self_rituals
useit_self_sw_as_spiritual
useit_self_symbols
useit_self_yoga
References


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