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Practice Principles for Social Work and Spirituality – A Focus on Practice Methods and Relationships [1a]

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in exploring and considering spirituality across social work approaches, accompanied by a strong demand for empirical research and the development of knowledge in this area. This paper describes a qualitative doctoral study, which explored twenty self-identified feminist social workers' conceptualizations of spirituality and spiritually influenced practices. Grounded theory analysis of interview data uncovered major convergences amongst participants' values and practices. These commonalities encouraged the development of a set of practice principles, which were then refined with the research participants by way of written feedback and focus groups. While the practice principles as a whole are briefly considered, the focus of this paper's discussion is on one grouping of the practice principles, which encompasses categories that arose from the participants' discussions of practice methods and relationships. Issues for consideration include ideas about incorporating spirituality in practice through shifting language and forming relationships with clients. Also explored are spiritually influenced practices such as making meaning, and fostering connections and experiences of self-love. Overall, the practice principles are relevant because they emerged from the participants' collective practice wisdom and can help to legitimize spiritual knowledge by promoting discussions about spirituality. The practice principles can also guide practice and teaching, and can provide a base for the further development of knowledge in this area.

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Introduction

This paper presents for consideration and discussion a set of practice principles for social work and spirituality, which emerged from a qualitative doctoral research study.[1] Although there is burgeoning interest in discussing spirituality in social work (Canda, 1998; Canda & Dyrud Furman, 1999; Hickson & Phelps, 1998; Powers, 1995; Radford Ruether, 1995; Ressler, 1998; Roberts, 1999), the work of this study necessarily began on an exploratory basis given the lack of research and empirically developed frameworks evident in the social work and spirituality literature. Currently, much of this literature is based on personal stories, experiences and reflections, case studies, and research such as surveys that argue for the relevance and effectiveness of spiritually influenced practice and that identify the need for further knowledge development (Abels, 2000; Bullis, 1996; Chawla, Derezotes, 1995; Krill, 1995). This reflects the state of development in this area and the nature of spiritual knowledge - to acknowledge the newness and the limits of the current literature is not a criticism of it, or of the type of knowledge it represents, particularly as practice wisdom and personal knowledge are highly relevant in explorations of spirituality.

Twenty self-identified feminist social workers were individually interviewed in-depth concerning their conceptualizations of spirituality, how spirituality shapes their practices, and their ideas about the effects of spiritually influenced practices. Grounded theory analysis of interview data uncovered surprising convergences amongst participants' beliefs, values and practices. These commonalities were developed into a set of practice principles for social work and spirituality, which constitute new knowledge in this area. The practice principles were refined with the research participants by way of written feedback and focus groups.

The research exploration was situated specifically in feminist social work practices as feminist social work values, processes and analyses are well suited to consider marginalized knowledges such as spirituality by making room for the "other", valuing experiences and connections, grounding knowledge in practice, and

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emphasizing diversity (Baines, 1997; Bricker-Jenkins, 1991; Dominelli, 1998; Lundy, 1993; Ochshorn & Cole, 1995). Additionally, some feminist social workers such as Bricker-Jenkins (1991) and Van Den Bergh (1995) have identified spirituality as an important emerging component of practice. However, the practice principles presented in this paper are applicable across a myriad of social work perspectives that share feminist social work values and practices such as an emphasis on diversity and inclusivity, social action and change, and process. Indeed, values and practices are increasingly being shared across social work perspectives, and this is in harmony with the trend towards generalist practice which Coates (1991) describes as supporting the move towards social workers becoming comfortable with multi-methods, multi-theory and multi-technique practice.

The practice principles as a whole are briefly discussed along with the relevancy of this framework for practice, teaching and further knowledge development. The focus of this paper is on practice methods and relationships. Accordingly, discussion then focuses on one group of practice principles that encompass the participants' ideas about spiritually influenced practices. These practices include spiritually influenced processes such as helping clients make meaning, and fostering connections and experiences of self-love. Also discussed is the use of generic spiritual language and the spiritual relationships that can be formed with clients. To begin, the research process and development of the practice principles is described.

The Research Process and Emergence of the Practice Principles
Grounded Theory Methods and Sampling Procedures

In general, grounded theory methods are inductive approaches that involve a continuous process of defining and redefining concepts, and relationships between concepts (Gilgun, 1994). The purpose of a grounded theory approach is to generate rather than test theory (Corbin, 1986). Gilgun (1994) contends that grounded theory is especially suitable for social work research as not only do the findings of the research fit the realities of practice, but also the similarities between practice and grounded theory methods are significant. These include a focus on the participant's/client's perspective and data collection methods such as interviewing. Grounded theory methods were particularly suitable for this research study as there is a lack of prior knowledge development in spirituality and social work, and findings may be highly relevant for practitioners as they emerge from the real world of practice.

In grounded theory approaches, sampling procedures are linked to coding processes that are being used to analyze incoming data. Typically, the process begins with a purposive, open sampling method and as the research inquiry progresses and the coding becomes more refined and abstract, the sampling becomes discriminate (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In discriminate sampling the researcher becomes deliberate about whom to sample in order to obtain needed data and to verify the theory, which has emerged from the data. For example, a participant information statement was initially used to help recruit participants for this study. The statement was mailed to all the organizations in the greater metropolitan Sydney (Australia) area that supervised social work field students for the University of New South Wales (UNSW) – approximately 300 agencies. The statement was also distributed in undergraduate and postgraduate classes at the UNSW and within a social work department in a major teaching hospital. Additionally, it was sent to the School of Social Work at the Flinders University of South Australia and to contacts I had in Brisbane in Queensland. I also personally contacted people who were identified as potential participants by colleagues and social workers who had heard about this study, and by participants already committed to the research. The sampling became more discriminate after the fourteenth interview was transcribed and analyzed. As a result, five participants were recruited based on characteristics such as work experience, gender and spiritual perspective.

In total, twenty self-identified feminist social workers (three men and seventeen women) were individually interviewed in-depth using a semi-structured format. They were asked to discuss their ideas regarding feminist social work and spirituality; expressions of spirituality (or not) in their practice; implications of including spirituality (or not) in practice; and future directions of practice. Interview methodology fits with grounded theory approaches and involves the participants in a meaningful way by grounding the research inquiry in their experiences, beliefs and values. Thus, it is a research process that is well suited to explorations of spirituality as spiritual discourse can be complex, abstract and highly personal. The semi-structured questions guided the dialogue but allowed for spontaneous questions, exploration and development of responses (Reinharz, 1992).

Overall, the participants represented an experienced group of practitioners with diverse direct practice experiences. For example, the participants worked in settings such as hospitals, non-government organizations, community health centers, child protection agencies and children's services, private practices, local government services, hospices, in disability services and at a university. Twelve participants indicated that they had ten or more years of social work experience. Additionally, seventeen of the participants were

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thirty-three years of age and older, one participant identified as Aboriginal, and six participants identified being from non-English speaking backgrounds.

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Data Analysis and Development of the Practice Principles
Mizrahi and Abramson(1994) explain that the first step in grounded theory data analysis is to devise a strategy to convert the mass of data into systematic schemas for examining its meaning, discovering themes and patterns, and making connections among concepts. Coding represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized and reconstructed in new ways. I transcribed the interviews and participant responses were color-coded and grouped into categories, which were continuously compared with one another and with emerging data in order to discover the links between them. Related categories were combined and compared again to incoming data while hypotheses that were emerging from the comparisons were assessed. This manual way of coding encouraged a strong familiarity with the data.

As the links between the categories are built the theory begins to emerge around core categories. As the data analysis continued, I was struck by significant emerging convergences amongst the participants' responses. On one hand, perhaps these convergences should have been anticipated due to the shared nature of values across spiritual perspectives, the similarities amongst the participants' social work perspectives, the extent of their direct practice experiences, and their interests in spirituality. But on the other hand, the extent of the commonalities was surprising given the diversity of the participants' backgrounds and experiences, the lack of previous research in the area, and the absence of "spiritual-social work" frameworks in the literature. Refinement of the theory comes from the continued connection and reduction of concepts that leads to increased abstraction (Glaser, 1978; Stern, 1986). Determining the story line (the main or core category) is necessary to achieve final integration of the data - the major convergences had emerged as the story line.

The uncovering of convergences regarding discussions of spirituality and spiritually influenced practices led to a conscious decision to pursue another level of data analysis, and later data collection. Given these commonalities new research questions emerged. For instance, I wondered if there was anything that distinguished a "feminist-spiritual" approach to social work practice and if it was possible to distinguish this emerging approach from other conventional models. Keeping these questions in mind, I returned to the data analysis. Categories were again reduced and connected, and the main themes that emerged were developed and written into a set of practice principles. This framework addresses the absence of previous knowledge development, the marginalization of spiritual knowledge and the need for language and frameworks. This layer became possible as the research unfolded and was not part of the original research plan. The final version of the practice principles is located in Table 1.

Table 1: Practice Principles for Social Work and Spirituality

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Once the practice principles were written it became evident that they could be organized into three broad groupings that address different aspects of the participants' spiritual beliefs and social work practices. For example, the third grouping – spiritually influenced practice processes and relationships, encompasses six practice principles that include the participants' ideas about the goals of practice and examples of spiritually influenced practices. Clearly, there is some overlap between the three groupings. Importantly, the practice principles make sense as a whole although each practice principle could also stand-alone for consideration. It should also be noted that the practice principles reflect areas of major consensus amongst the participants' viewpoints, values and practices – differences also exist between participants but the scope of this paper does not allow for an examination of these divergences.

All of the participants were sent a preliminary draft of the practice principles and were invited to submit written feedback. Ten participants sent back written feedback that was used to edit the practice principles. When a decision was made to seek feedback from the participants, a decision was also made to invite them to take part in focus groups in order to discuss the practice principles and related issues. This process was followed in order to check how accurately the practice principles reflected the participants' viewpoints, values and practices. Its other aim was to further refine the practice principles, to maintain adherence to the feminist and qualitative research epistemology, and to increase the rigor of the research process by adding another layer of data collection and analysis.

Fourteen of the twenty participants (two men and twelve women) took part in three focus groups, which were held over a six week period after written feedback was received from participants. Two groups each had four participants and one group had six participants. Based on the written feedback and further consideration of the convergences that had emerged, the participants were presented with three broad topics for discussion. They were asked to consider feminism and spirituality (are the practice principles feminist); private knowledge (might the practice principles help discuss their practice); congruencies versus differences (how might the practice principles be applied); and to comment on the revised practice principles.

As with the individual interviews, I tape-recorded and transcribed the focus group meetings, and copies of the transcripts were sent to the participants to check the accuracy of the transcription and to offer the opportunity for feedback. The transcripts were analyzed in the same manner as the individual interviews using a grounded theory methodological approach. This analysis generated many of the same categories as the interview analysis. New categories that emerged were in reference to the feminist nature of the practice principles.

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The Relevance of the Practice Principles

Themes that can be in harmony with spirituality such as morality, love, relationship, sharing a common humanity, and compassion have in varying degrees always been a part of general social work discourse – see for examples Krill (1978), Wilkes (1981), Reid and Popple (1992), and Reamer (1993). However, it was not until the late-1980's that the literature explicitly discussing spirituality in social work and identifying spiritual concepts and practice processes began to proliferate. Canda (1988) was one of the first researchers to conceptualize a working definition of spirituality for social work. Since that time, the literature exploring spirituality in helping has become substantial especially within North America (Abels, 2000; Canda & Dyrud Furman, 1999; Edwards, 2002; Goldstein, 1999; Powell Stanard, Singh Sandhu, & Painter, 2000). This strong interest is also evidenced in the development of conferences such as the First Annual Canadian Social Work and Spirituality Conference that was held in Toronto (Ontario) in May 2002. However, while interest in discussing spirituality within social work continues to expand, the literature lacks discussion and exploration of empirical research that investigates and develops practice implications, intervention methods, and guiding frameworks.

While some of the themes represented in the practice principles such as the emphasis on relationship and fostering self-love appear to be in line with a general social work philosophy, by no means is spirituality or framing these processes as spiritual ones, accepted as valid knowledge across social work. For example, even with practice wisdom and experience almost all of the research participants expressed concerns about being ostracized, judged and/or ridiculed by other social workers if they discussed spirituality in social work contexts. Overall, the participants believe that social workers are unsupportive of, or not interested in, exploring spirituality in practice. Some of the adjectives used to describe how they believe spirituality is perceived are *hippie, namby-pamby, looney tunes and wanky.*[2] In general, in the participants' social work, incorporations of spirituality occurred without discussion and feedback with colleagues, without guiding frameworks, and with feelings of caution and even apprehension. Thus, the development of frameworks that are based in practice wisdom is often necessary to legitimate marginalized knowledge and practice. The practice principles are highly relevant as they emerged from the collective practice wisdom of a group of

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experienced practitioners and constitute a framework for practice that can further the process of shifting spiritual knowledge into more mainstream social work discourses. The unease and uncertainty that is associated with the use of spirituality is most likely to affect practitioners by hampering their abilities to extend their practice and develop the richness of suitable spiritual practice. The practice principles can provide guidelines or limits of what is an appropriate professional use of spirituality in practice.

The need for practitioners to demonstrate self-awareness and the importance of empathy are well recognized within social work and other allied helping professions. Indeed, both the exploration of personal values and the development of empathic skills are usually taught as basic helping skills which are integral to effective practice. The practice principles reflect this emphasis on personal development but augment this process by focusing attention on life-long spiritual development and a spiritual dimension in personal and professional experiences. The practice principles promote the links between personal spiritual development and practice effectiveness and meaningfulness, thereby addressing an area of life and work experience that has previously been ignored - they may be especially useful for practitioners who lack practice wisdom but have engaged in spiritual exploration. As many of the participants point out, work and life experiences helped them to feel more comfortable about including spirituality in the absence of spiritual frameworks or practice models. Using the practice principles, social workers can consider how spirituality can influence social work processes, which has implications for education in that students could be encouraged to consider spirituality on personal and professional levels.

Additionally, the practice principles can help to shape practice in other ways. For example, the practice principles can assist in facilitating discussions about spirituality, which in turn could promote feelings of professional competence and legitimacy concerning the inclusion of spirituality. The importance of making room for spiritual discussion cannot be over-emphasized. Most of the participants stressed how taking part in this research process helped them to articulate, understand and develop their analyses regarding spirituality in social work. Certainly the discussions that took place as a result of this study have helped both the participants and myself feel a greater sense of permission about including spirituality in our social work. While these discussions have contributed to the process of shifting spiritual knowledge and practice out of the margins (albeit on a small scale), the development of the practice principles can significantly further this process by extending this opportunity to other practitioners and students. In fact, if spiritual knowledge is to be legitimized, then discussions about spirituality will have to extend across social work approaches, and the practice principles offer a framework for these considerations.

Access to a guiding framework such as the practice principles can also help to articulate practice methods, which can lead to more transparent practices. For example, the practice principles may help practitioners feel more professionally confident in discussing spiritual issues with clients and colleagues by supporting their interests in spirituality and the relevance of it for practice, and by reflecting some of their own processes such as the use of generic spiritual language. Perhaps feeling more professionally confident would encourage discussions with colleagues thereby decreasing a sense of isolation and importantly, providing a space in which thoughts and practices can be refined and further developed. Explicitly discussing spiritually influenced practices could also lead to more transparent and accountable practices in that colleagues can question and help develop practices.

The following discussion presents an analysis of categories that emerged from the participants' discussions concerning practice methods and relationships. Specifically, the categories that are reflected in practice principles seven, eight, nine, ten, and eleven are explored. This discussion furthers an understanding of the practice principles and illustrates the applicability of this framework in helping social workers to reflect on practice, teaching and further research. Some of the themes encapsulated in these practice principles are also reflected in the social work and spirituality literature, which lends support to the practice principles and conversely supports findings in the literature that are not empirically based - these connections are made in the forthcoming discussion.

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Practice Methods and Relationships
Language and Spiritually Influenced Practices[3]

Consistently across the research sample, the participants stress that they accommodate a client's spiritual perspective by shifting their language to converge with a client's discourse. Various rationales are provided for shifting language that includes respect, the promotion of deeper connections, to transcend differences and to achieve practice goals. Explicit spiritual discourse is not often engaged in. In general, the participants emphasize the importance of using what speaks to people and working with a language that people relate to.

Several participants identified that they shifted their language out of respect for the client. As one participant notes, *If you want to deliver a spiritual language, you use something they understand. You start from where they are.* You don't expect them to move to your position. Other participants identified that a deeper connection with clients can occur when language is shifted. For instance, *Social workers have a language . . . doctors have a language and Christians have a language, and so I would speak in that language to them. There would be a deeper connection.* This comment illustrates that when religious beliefs are shared between client and worker, the use of religious language can promote a closer, more meaningful or effective connection. On the other hand, one participant explains that if clients use religious language exclusively she will work with them to build a more generic language, so if their religious perspective is threatened they will still have a means of discussing spirituality. These two examples can be related to Doherty's (1999) Three Domains of Language and Meaning model, which supports the practice of introducing spiritual issues through the language of overlap areas and using spiritual/religious terms if the client's beliefs are known.

Participants also shifted their language in order to communicate more effectively, to achieve practice aims and goals, and to transcend differences. As one participant explains, *I'm not going to impose anything on them . . . so if they have Christian beliefs then I will use their Christian beliefs . . . and incorporate some of the energy and experience I've got into that to help them recover.* Overall, language is chosen because of its perceived helpfulness to the social work process. This is demonstrated in the following comment by a participant who chose to omit the use of the word spirituality to enable more effective communication and to transcend differences regarding definitions of spirituality. For example, *If I say spiritual, it's got to come from the Bible and that . . . religious philosophy. That's her concept of spiritual. Whereas if I talk energy she goes, "Oh yeah, that's good. I can feel that…that's right, okay."*

There was also wide recognition that religious language has oppressed some people. As one participant discussed, even though she has *liberative ways of talking about God*, she realizes that for many women such language is oppressive. She shifts her language because *As a woman who comes from a Judeo-Christian background, I would want to I guess be in some sense of solidarity with my sisters who didn't experience Christianity as much else other than oppressive.* Several other participants point out that religious language produces tremendous barriers. Thus, religious language is generally avoided except in cases where the client introduces this language into the process and/or it is deemed useful to the helping process, as in the example provided above that discusses using religious language to enable connections with clients.

Engaging in explicit discussions about spirituality is not the norm for the participants except in situations where worker and client share spiritual perspectives, the client introduces spirituality and/or the topics under consideration facilitate these discussions. The participants who regularly engage explicitly in spiritual discussions work in contexts and with client populations that most often meet these conditions, such as palliative care and private practice. Various explanations are provided for avoiding explicit discussion about spirituality such as fears of marginalization and lack of acceptance by the client, the secular nature of social work, acknowledging the capability to act oppressively and lacking a spiritual language. The lack of explicit spiritual discourse raises questions concerning the transparency of practice.

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Language and Spirituality – Transparency of Practice
The following comment illustrates that there are also instances when the participants are influenced and guided by personal ideas about spirituality and times when helping processes are understood as spiritual without identifying this to clients. For example,

> I might have said, we'll do a bit of relaxation, a bit of meditation and that's all I'd say. But the commentary might be similar to a spiritual commentary without me calling it that. And so I'd get them to focus on the soul, focus on the third eye, without using that word . . . my role as a social worker is not spiritual teaching as such, my role is to help them recover.

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This example and others like it raise questions about the absence of explicit spiritual discourse. Many of the participants acknowledge that they are not transparent in their practices with clients regarding spirituality and several participants question this, wondering if they should be more explicit. It could be argued that this non-transparency is contrary to feminist and other anti-oppressive social work approaches that aim to equalize power imbalances between worker and client by identifying counselling perspectives. However, only two participants identify this issue as an ethical one and none of the participants link it with feminist social work values. In fact, one participant points out that if she talks directly with her clients about how she uses spirituality, the clients wouldn't understand or it would challenge or frighten them leading to an ineffective process. Her viewpoint is not meant to be patronizing, but reflects her experience as a practitioner and her concern with helping clients to achieve their goals. Another participant did not want clients to have preconceived ideas about her or the work that could be engaged in.

Actually, based on expressed concerns of acting oppressively with clients and the rationales for not discussing spirituality, most participants would likely identify the explicit discussion of personal viewpoints regarding spirituality as unethical, and an inappropriate use of their power and influence as professionals. The association of spirituality with personal values leaves the participants feeling wary about explicitly engaging in these discussions with clients. However, while the development of spiritual frameworks as legitimate methods may encourage the use of spiritually influenced practices, legitimizing spirituality will not necessarily lead to more explicit discussions or transparent practices.

For example, both the use of language that fits for clients and the avoidance of it in some situations are mirrored in the participants' feminist practices. Many of the participants explained that they might not explicitly use feminist language with clients either because it may be confusing, misleading and at odds with the goals of the helping process. While this may not be in harmony with feminist values, perhaps the non-explicit use of feminist language is a reflection of the participants' practice experience, that is, as practice wisdom and personal knowledge are developed there is less reliance on textbook theory and practice. Indeed, social workers are guided by a myriad of personal and professional perspectives that are not always identified to clients, just as every therapeutic technique is not generally explained. Ultimately, the primary emphasis in the participants' practices is to utilize language that is deemed most appropriate, helpful and effective for clients' processes.

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Making Meaning[4]
Making meaning processes are described by Hartman (1996) as one aspect of human existence and the sense of purpose or meaning in everyday life that makes life livable. Alternatively, meaninglessness conjures up feelings of hopelessness, isolation and in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts.The practice of helping clients to make meaning is described as a spiritual one by many participants because spirituality itself is conceptualized as a process of making meaning. Hartman (1996, p.3) agrees that finding meaning in crisis and making meaning in life is an act of spirituality and a spiritual task. In response to a query regarding the rationale for identifying making meaning as a spiritually influenced practice, one participant explains, *Because I think spirituality is about meaning . . . I let people explore whatever that stuff is. And it's all about meaning*. The participants' ideas of making meaning as a spiritual process are congruent with the literature. For example, Barrett (1999) describes healing from trauma as a quest for spirituality that reflects a deep need for meaning.

Four participants specifically discussed helping people deal with death and dying as a spiritual making meaning process. One participant argues that helping people to face and make sense of deeply personal, intimate issues related to dying involves spirituality. She states, *Because I think in a sense it's all about spirituality. About human beings in crisis and what resources do we have and what does it mean to…suffer*. Another participant believes that it is important to help people explore whatever they want around their spirituality and death in whatever form fits for them, including constructions of *where they're going, what they think is going to happen to them . . . it's their private stuff. That's their way of making sense of their world. It's not mine*. This participant emphasizes the importance of coming to terms with dying and that the process has to be resolved by the client without him imposing his beliefs about death and spirituality. The issues clients bring to the helping process certainly influence the need (or not) to engage in making meaning, and death is certainly an experience that encourages these processes.

One participant also argues that the assumption should not be made that there is always meaning in suffering. She makes the distinction between making meaning and finding meaning, stressing that sometimes there is no meaning to be found in suffering but that it has to be constructed. As she describes, some clients take a long time to make meaning, some have already resolved what the meaning of their suffering is, others are ready and willing to engage in the making meaning process and still others might never make meaning of their situation. In other words, pain and suffering often seem unfair but despite the unfairness of life's challenges, people can make sense of these situations that can help to address these struggles.

Other definitions of spirituality also influenced what practices were identified as spiritual. For instance, the participants defined spirituality as connection, that is, connection to something bigger/transcendent, community, one's self, environment, culture, nature, and other people. Thus, assisting clients to foster connections on a myriad of levels was also identified as spiritually influenced practice.

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Fostering Connections[5]

Most of the participants discussed how helping clients foster connections with community, in groups and with their feelings are spiritually influenced practice. As the following comment illustrates, helping clients build community is a spiritual process that aids in promoting a positive sense of self: *Because I define spirituality as a lot around my values around community, and also a lot around my values of people being empowered to find their own goals and communities to find their own goals. That influences my work profoundly . . . helping people build their community . . . I see that's where our sense of self and our sense of valuing ourselves comes from, is having agood experience of community and interpersonal relationships.*

Another participant describes how a group of women whom she had facilitated writing workshops for, had decided to continue their meetings when the workshops ended. She attributes this desire for the ongoing group connection to spirituality and contends that:

> There's something deeper than just that they're a group of women who meet for writing that keeps them there, and that sort of sharing in their lives and the connecting at that level…I don't think it's just in therapy groups…the process of what happens in groups and support that people can get…I think that there's a spiritual dimension to that.

Similarly, some feminist literature discusses how group connection can encompass spirituality. For instance, Ballou (1995) argues that feminist spirituality is grounded in community, connection and relationship, and Kimmel and Kazanis (1995) describe the deep spiritual connections that can occur in consciousness raising and counselling groups.

Assisting clients to connect with their feelings was also identified as spiritually influenced practice and was associated with helping people to connect with their spirituality. All of the participants identify the connection of feelings with spirituality, for example, *People who shut down their emotions find dealing with spirituality very difficult . . . the emotional life is very close to spirituality*. Another participant explains that she focuses on how clients are feeling and how they manage emotions because this constitutes working with the soul stuff. Similarly, one participant frames a disconnection from feelings as an intimacy issue stating, *I find that people who have difficulties with becoming intimate have a sense of disconnectedness within themselves . . . .It's around trust and it's around acceptance*. Thus, it is perceived that a consequence of being disconnected from feelings is a hampered ability to be intimate with others and to form connections with one's spirituality.

Overall, the participants identified disconnection from both feelings and spirituality as impeding the development of self-awareness, spiritual growth and relationships. As one participant notes, *people live their lives very, very quickly and have lost that kind of . . . in touchness if you like. In touch with themselves and in touch . . . with others and the planet*. As a result, some participants liken the social work process to a facilitation of connectedness, which demonstrates the importance placed on connections. It is important to note however, that most of the participants also agree that being able to disconnect from unhealthy people and influences is equally important, and in the process of disconnecting from these negative influences sometimes more positive connections occur.

Finally, one participant illustrates how fostering a connection with what she calls her heart center promotes a more effective practice for her and her clients. She describes:

> When I'm sitting with clients, I'll sit with my mantra. I'll sit and repeat my mantra . . . it's very centering for me . . . as a therapist. And I can kind of drop into a very still, calm place. And from that place I work with people and my mind is clearer, I'm centered, I'm open, I'm not judging . . . they get the benefit of the fact that I am calm, centered, clear-headed, connected to my heart center.

The connection that can occur between social worker and client is analyzed next as it was specifically identified as an incorporation of spirituality by most of the participants.

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The Social Worker-Client Relationship[6]

Overall, the participants described their relationships with clients as spiritual when they were wholly present with clients, sharing client's stories and when a deep connection had occurred between them. The importance of acknowledging these client connections because of potential effects on workers is also identified, as is the relevance of relationship in affecting change.

One participant believes that spirituality is present when he is wholly attending to someone. For example: *For me it's about sitting with someone's pain. Someone's grief. Allowing yourself to be there. That's spiritual because it demands so much of you*. Other participants indicated that a connection is spiritual when it feels like it exists on a spiritual level or a higher level of consciousness or awareness, which are viewpoints reflected in the literature. Indeed, for some practitioners the very essence of the therapeutic relationship is spiritual because it fosters personal transformation, wholeness, intimate relationships and involves opening the self to sorrow and connection (Walsh, 1999; Weingarten, 1999). One participant discusses the importance of understanding these deep spiritual connections as part of our professional role. She believes that: *We really connect with some of our clients at quite a deep level. And to understand that as part of the professional role that we have. Not something outside of it because as soon as we say that it's outside of it, it can throw us*. Her comment emphasizes the importance of understanding how practitioners can be affected by the relationships they form with clients. Recognizing how we are connected with and affected by clients also reflects feminist and other anti-oppressive social work values. For example, several participants point out how through personal life experiences and growth, they now feel less of a separation and more of a connection with clients. As one participant notes: *That's part of me seeing that I'm connected to everyone . . . .I don't see that there's a line between myself and my clients. Because I've been a client too*. Another participant attributes feeling less of a separateness from clients to her spiritual growth. She points out that consequently her work has *taken on more of a spiritual dimension . . . there is more of a sense of being connected and that my human experience is really just the same as theirs*. These examples also illustrate how the development of practice wisdom that is influenced by life experiences and spiritual development can encourage a more egalitarian helping philosophy focused on relationship.

Along these lines, one participant believes that for the most part it is her relationship with clients that affects change, not what she is doing in terms of therapeutic techniques. It is her process of being with that person that influences the client to shift. Within the social work literature, Klein and Cnaan (1995) discuss a practice model that emphasizes the building of relationships. In their opinion, the importance of relationship is substantiated in the social work research literature. For the participants in this study, the ability and willingness to form spiritual connections with clients appears to be influenced by their commitment to a continual process of spiritual development and self-awareness.

However, not every effective relationship needs to encompass a spiritual connection. Clients may not be willing to engage with us on that level and likewise, we may not deem it appropriate to do so. Also, some contexts and client populations such as involuntary clients, may not encourage the formation of spiritual relationships. Interestingly however, a spiritual connection with an involuntary or hostile client may be possible. For example, one participant describes how she sometimes attempts to connect and form a relationship with a client's higher consciousness, especially clients who are difficult to engage, for the purposes of achieving a positive outcome. She notes: *There are times that I've been aware of being in an interview with people and . . . some other connection has occurred . . . I will consciously use that if I think it's a situation that is going to be really hard going*. In this example the participant understands spirituality as including a higher consciousness. Thus, connecting with a person's higher consciousness is spiritual for her.

The final theme that emerged in discussions about practice methods and relationships concerns experiencing self-love and a sense of wholeness. Many participants define spirituality as an experience of love. Consequently, helping clients to feel self-love and wholeness is also identified as spiritually influenced practice.

Self-Love and Wholeness[7]

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For many participants, a connection to spirituality converges with experiencing a positive sense of self. As one participant notes: *Spirituality is about a good sense of self. And . . . having good spirituality, having a fulfilled soul is being in touch and in tune with the Self. And I think the more detached you are, the less spiritual you feel*. Similarly, another participant explains that her *present belief about spiritualism and myself is something about a belief in yourself . . . a belief that you can rely on yourself, that you are a good person, a kind person and a healthy person*. These viewpoints influence practices in various ways. For instance, some participants emphasize the need for people to love themselves while others stress fostering feelings of wholeness, and both of these experiences are linked with more meaningful and effective practice processes.

The bottom line for some participants is to assist people to develop their self-acceptance and self-love and to learn to nurture themselves because: *Unless people like themselves . . . nothing comes, nothing else. You really have got nowhere to go if you don't love yourself. Another participant explains that she talks to people about wholeness and oneness and what it means to feel content with themselves as people, to feel good about themselves, proud of their choices, to believe in the positive aspects of themselves, to believe in their own good . . . . that they are good enough*. One participant emphasizes that what is important is the experience of feeling self-love. In her opinion, this feeling has to be an energetic, physical and emotional experience.

All of these perspectives reflect beliefs that because spirituality is conceptualized as love, assisting people to connect with their spirituality can promote feelings of self-love and, vice versa, that feeling self-love can promote the development of spirituality. It should be noted that while a positive sense of self can augment the processes of self-growth and reflection, which can include spirituality, certainly people who do not feel good about themselves can also turn to spirituality for assistance or guidance. These discussions about self-love are interesting given Morley and Ife's (2002) contention that the word "love" is not often found in the social work literature, nor is it a common part of day-to-day discourse about practice. They identify the idea of love as a marginalized discourse within social work. For the participants in this study, the strong association between spirituality and love led to these reflections on self-love.

Assisting clients to develop a sense of wholeness, which is related to feelings of self-love was identified as essential by three participants. One participant points out that a spiritual process for many clients is the search for something that will make them feel whole. Another participant emphasizes recognizing the wholeness of people's experiences and believes that: *People are more than people with HIV. People are more than women . . . for me, it's about saying . . . people are more than having an illness. They're also sexual people, they're also spiritual people . . . .So I think it's about putting those other aspects of people's lives in the open and supporting and nurturing every aspect of people's lives*. Another participant believes that when people sense a feeling of wholeness then: *Healing and therapy is an easier road. Once you have experienced it then you know what . . . your goals are*.

As this last comment indicates, helping people feel and experience self-love and wholeness is connected to a more effective and meaningful practice experience. For example, one participant describes the process of helping people to experience a valuing of themselves as rewarding. She describes: *Finding significance, the significance of them . . . and the significance of their relationships and the significance of their relationship with God is just . . . awesome. It's just amazing*. Another participant points out that her experience of spirituality has been: *That it has the potential to heal very deeply. And offer a lot of joy. She wonders if she sees that and others see that, then I suppose to not offer that would in a sense perhaps be an obligation of the duty of care*. It appears that at the very least social work should attend to spirituality and consider its applications in practice. Better still would be to study the effectiveness of spiritually influenced practices.

Finally, one participant discussed her thoughts about how these feelings of wholeness and self-love are created. She believes that there is no formula that can be relied on that will inform us about when this is going to occur for people, and she understands healing and a sense of wholeness as a spiritual gift. For instance: *There's something about the receptiveness of . . . the human spirit. When it's done enough work to accept a gift of some kind*. This example demonstrates that dynamics occur within practice that may be difficult to articulate and grasp, and practice often includes these more abstract constructs.

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Conclusion

The need for empirical research to develop, broaden and strengthen our understanding of how spirituality shapes practice experiences beyond the experience of sole practitioners is evident, as is the need for frameworks that can aid in discussing and considering spirituality in social work. This paper discussed the results of a qualitative study that has gone beyond the exploration of spirituality in feminist practices by developing a set of practice principles that constitutes a guiding framework for social workers interested in incorporating spirituality in their work.

In keeping with a grounded theory methodology, the unexpected emergence of convergent categories amongst the research participants' ideas, values and practices, and the lack of development of empirically based models in the literature, necessitated a return to the research method. The possibility of articulating practice principles developed with the analysis of the convergent categories. The practice principles were then refined with the research participants through written feedback and focus groups. Overall, the practice principles can assist in promoting a more transparent and accountable practice by legitimizing spiritual knowledge and promoting feelings of professional competence; by assisting to articulate spiritually influenced work; and by suggesting limits for the professional use of spirituality in practice.

One grouping of practice principles in particular was discussed, which encompasses categories that emerged from participants' explorations of practice methods and relationships. For the participants in this study, spirituality was incorporated into practice through the processes of shifting language, making meaning, fostering connections, forming spiritual relationships with clients, and promoting experiences of self-love and wholeness. These practices are reflected in the social work and spirituality literature, which lends support to the practice principles.

While the legitimization of spiritual knowledge may help social workers to feel more justified in using this knowledge, whether spirituality should be more explicitly named in practice is yet to be determined. Also, a greater understanding of spiritually influenced concepts such as self-love, wholeness, relationship and connection is required because these experiences appear to encourage effective and meaningful processes for clients and workers but our knowledge about them is limited. Indeed, the options for further research in this area are considerable, as is the need to continue to uncover and articulate spiritual knowledge and practices.

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Endnotes

[1] Spirituality and religion are understood differently in this study. Spirituality is eclectic and transcends ideologies and institutions. It refers to a complex construct that can be deeply personal and communal, and that can encompass a sense of connection with something bigger that transcends ordinary life experience (something bigger is necessarily self-defined). Religion can be described as a construction of institutionalized worship that is dependent on a notion of God or Godheads and that is based on doctrine or a system of organized beliefs and behaviours, usually shared by people.

[2] The participants' words are in italics.

[3] Practice principle number seven is: Generic language is often used with clients in discussions about spirituality and spiritual issues. Language is shifted in order to accommodate clients' perspectives, to foster connections, and importantly, to facilitate effective and helpful social work processes.

[4] Practice principle number eight is: Spirituality is often a part of making meaning of life and work experiences. The social work process of making meaning can be a spiritual one because it is an intimate, personal and/or communal process that helps clients explore values and beliefs.

[5] Practice principle number nine is: Connection in many forms such as with oneself, community, nature and the Universe/God is valued and deemed important for the development of self-awareness and relationships with others. Also, fostering a connection with one's spirit or spirituality can positively influence the quality and effectiveness of social work processes. Disconnection is also important and is sometimes a necessary process.

[6] Practice principle number ten is: The relationship between social worker and client(s) is important and can affect the meaningfulness and effectiveness of social work processes. This relationship can be spiritual in that it may involve the sharing of life stories, deep connection, and feelings of compassion and caring.

[7] Practice principle number eleven is: It is important to foster a client's ability to feel and experience trust, love and respect for self and others, as these experiences can be linked with spiritual development. A client's

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spiritual beliefs may influence their self-perceptions and interactions with others.

[1a] A condensed version of this paper was presented at the First Annual Canadian Social Work and Spirituality Conference – Toronto, May 25, 2002.

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References

Enter text in this area [Style=newReference]. Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe, quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.

Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe, quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.

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The Effects of Spiritual Practice on Wellness. Issues for Practitioners. Assessing Spirituality and Religion. Summary. Chapter 14 our collective wisdom on social relationships and wellness. Evolution of Research on Social Relationships and Wellness. CHAPTER 15 SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: BURDENS AND BENEFITS 188 By Andrew P. Daire Social Relationships and Wellness: An Overview 188 Our "Cross-Developmental" Relationship Task 190 Five Life Tasks for Wellness and Social Relationships 191 Spirituality: Burdens and Benefits 191 Self-Direction: Burdens and Benefits 192 Work and Leisure: Burdens and Benefits 194 Friendship: Burdens and Benefits 196 Love: Burdens and Benefits 197. Working with the Practice Principles will deepen the professional conversations taking place in Victorian government schools, support the development of a shared language for teaching and learning and help us to articulate what teaching and learning excellence looks like. This resource provides an opportunity for teachers to evaluate their practice with a focus on one or more of the Practice Principles and share reflections and new understandings about what works in classrooms with their colleagues. For teachers in the early years these discussions can also occur collaboratively with early childhood professionals using the VEYLDF Practice Principles to discuss evidence-based approaches to best practice. The social worker uses client-centered change talk to help individuals surface their ambivalence to change and to help them begin to understand how change might improve the quality of their functioning and relationships. MI is useful with clients who have substance abuse disorders. Narrative.