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Exploring the Experiences of Social Workers Using Spirituality in Their Practice

by

Jill Ciesielski

A THESIS

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Abstract

Despite decades of discussion, spirituality remains a neglected area of social work education and practice. This study explored the experiences and perspectives of seven social work practitioners in Alberta who are actively incorporating spirituality into their practice through qualitative interviews. The findings indicated the ways these practitioners are using spirituality in their direct work with clients, the relationship between their own personal spirituality and their work, and the ways in which their specific practice context influences their use of spirituality in practice. Despite a lack of guidance with respect to spirituality in their social work education and training, participants were drawing on their own experiences and resources to inform their use of spirituality in practice. While this highlighted the resourcefulness of the participants, it also raised ethical questions about the implications of this more broadly within the social work profession. Implications for social work education, practice, and policy and recommendations for future research are also outlined.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, J. Ciesielski. The experiments reported in Chapters 3-5 were covered by Ethics Certificate number REB21-0812, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) for the project "Exploring Perspectives of Social Work Practitioners Using Spirituality in Practice" on August 3, 2021.

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I would like to thank my friends and family for their ongoing support, interest, and encouragement in this process, with a special thank you to my husband who went through this with me and was supportive the entire way. I am also grateful to the participants of this study who took the time to participate and shared so openly and honestly; thank you for your contributions that made this study possible.

Finally, thank you to my supervisors Christine Walsh and Jennifer Hewson, who made the perfect team to guide me along this journey. Thank you for your encouragement, knowledge, and guidance.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In this introductory chapter, I will briefly outline my thesis topic of spirituality in social work, explain why I chose this topic, and provide a rationale for this research study. This rationale will also include a discussion of my personal relationship to the topic and references to literature that supports the relevance of the study. Finally, I will describe the organization of my thesis.

Study Rationale

My thesis centres on the use of spirituality in social work from the perspective of practitioners in Alberta who are using spirituality in their practice. I conducted qualitative interviews with social work practitioners in the province of Alberta who are using spirituality in their work with the aim of exploring what is working well for them and what supports their practice in this area as well as challenges they may face.

I would also like to note the language I use throughout this thesis with respect to spirituality. I talk about the "use" (or lack thereof) of spirituality in social work practice, sometimes using the words "incorporate" or "implement." These words in reference to spirituality may suggest an overly utilitarian approach or imply that something sacred can simply be used as a clinical tool. Though this is not how I wish to portray spirituality within the context of social work, guidance for more appropriate language was not provided in the literature.

I was inspired to pursue spirituality in social work as my thesis topic because of my own practice experience and what I perceived as a gap in social work education and practice. Spirituality was only briefly discussed in both my Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, and we did not discuss how to implement a holistic or spiritual approach in practice. Additionally, it was largely absent at the agencies I have worked at as a

frontline social worker. However, in my practice, spirituality was frequently identified by my clients in our work together and, when it arose, I felt ill-equipped to properly address it. I found that it was also central to many of my clients' worldviews and experiences, but I was unsure of how to integrate spirituality effectively and ethically into my work.

I personally was not raised within any organized religion or with any spiritual set of beliefs. However, as an adult I have become increasingly interested in spirituality and curious about different belief systems, and I have been exploring and seeking spirituality for several years. I am open-minded to many different belief systems and have encountered a variety both personally and professionally. My career as a social worker has actually deepened my interest in spirituality, which has in turn made me realize that social workers also bring their own spiritual beliefs and worldview to their work. Yet, this was also only minimally acknowledged in my social work education and training.

Because I felt my own personal practice was lacking a critical dimension, I wanted to learn more about the role of spirituality in social work. However, since it was not addressed through my courses in school or at my various workplaces, it appeared to be both a personal and professional issue. The literature on this topic supports that this is somewhat of a blind spot for social work, and rather than approaching health and well-being from a holistic perspective that includes spirituality, social work as a profession has largely avoided discussions of spirituality in an effort to establish itself as an evidence-based scientific discipline (Cole, 2021; Zapf, 2005). Though social work has significant religious origins, the profession underwent a period of professionalization and secularization during the 20th century (Cole, 2021). This avoidance of spiritual issues may also be due to a fear of imposing belief systems or frames of reference onto others (Zapf, 2005).

According to Cole (2021), in the 1980s and 1990s, several scholars called for the need to reintroduce spirituality into social work with an emphasis on inclusion and respect for a variety of beliefs, because of the importance of spiritual issues to clients. This was supported by most practitioners, students, and educators; however, to this day practitioners, students, and educators continue to indicate a lack of education and training around spirituality (Cole, 2021). This lack of guidance on the use of spirituality in practice has largely left those who wish to incorporate spirituality to "rely on their own initiative and inventiveness, with no clear theoretical, practical, or ethical guidelines" (Carrington, 2013, p. 288). In addition to being necessary for competent and ethical practice (Carrington, 2013), the inclusion of spirituality in social work can serve to counter the "technologization, managerialism, and medicalization of social work practice" (Wong & Vinsky, 2009, p. 1344).

The literature also supports the importance of spirituality to many people. Religiosity and spirituality have been linked to better mental health outcomes and have been demonstrated as both a protective factor and means of coping (Dilmaghani, 2018). They can also provide a sense of purpose and community (Dilmaghani, 2018). Survey data from Statistics Canada (2021) from 2019 indicated that over two-thirds of Canada's population reported having a religious affiliation, with over half stating that their beliefs were somewhat or very important to how they lived their lives; however, the data did not indicate those who might consider themselves as spiritual without having a religious affiliation. My thesis research is grounded in the belief that spirituality is a key part of the human experience, which is why social work as a human-centred profession must both acknowledge and address it.

I must also acknowledge my own privileged position as a white settler social worker and how that may impact my approach to this topic. For example, Wong and Vinsky (2009) caution

against the tendency for social work scholars to approach spirituality in social work through a "spiritual-but-not-religious" lens (p. 1343). In this type of discourse, spirituality is usually elevated above religion under the assumption it is neutral and transcends history and culture (Wong & Vinsky, 2009). Wong and Vinsky (2009) argue that this binary serves to 'other' racialized and marginalized groups, as they are typically seen as religious. Removing complex traditions from their histories and contexts also allows white Westerners to consume or appropriate certain aspects, as is the case with some Eastern and Indigenous traditions (Wong & Vinsky, 2009). As a white Western social worker, I reflected on and interrogated any potential biases that might arise and influence my approach to this topic. This is essential in the context of Alberta due to the province's diversity and its history of colonialism and discrimination, in which religion has played a role. Religion and spirituality may be closely tied to the experiences of marginalized groups or individuals, and it is imperative to be aware of this context.

Thesis Organization

I have conducted a more extensive literature review on spirituality in social work, which is presented in the next chapter. The literature review helped me refine my focus within my chosen topic and identify my research questions. The literature review details definitions of spirituality, the relevance of spirituality in social work, spirituality as an issue of cultural humility and social justice, practitioners' perspectives, ethical considerations, and spirituality in social work education. The third chapter is the methods section, which includes my purpose statement and research questions, paradigm, theoretical framework, methodological approach, researcher reflexivity, and ethical considerations. The fourth chapter presents the results of the research, including themes from the data analysis and key quotes from participants. The final

chapter, the discussion chapter, includes a discussion of the findings, study limitations, implications for social work practice and education, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

My literature review begins with a discussion of the definition of spirituality, including some of the critical debate surrounding this term in social work, and the definition I will be using for the purposes of this research. I will also discuss the importance of addressing spirituality in social work education and practice, as well as what some scholars have stated about spirituality in the profession at both a macro and micro level. Finally, I will identify research that has been conducted with practitioners on this topic and identify the gap in the literature that my research will address. My literature review was conducted between 2020 and 2022 using databases from the University of Calgary library and search terms related to spirituality, religion, and social work. The review was largely confined to social work literature and is not reflective of literature from other disciplines.

Definition of Spirituality

Defining spirituality within the context of social work poses some challenges, since it is highly personal and can vary greatly between groups or individuals (Canda et al., 2020). The current discourse in social work tends to define spirituality in universal terms, with the view that everyone is spiritual (Hodge, 2018). While this promotes a more flexible understanding of spirituality and religion, it may not be congruent with all clients' views on spirituality or religion (including those who do not identify as spiritual in any way); it can de-contextualize spirituality and may result in a lack of specificity (Hodge, 2018).

Senreich (2013) advances that spirituality is conceptualized within social work in a way that is both amorphous and non-inclusive, as it regards people as "more" or "less" spiritual and does "not validate each person's unique relationship to what is unknowable" (p. 550). Any definition offered for spirituality must be inclusive of a variety of points of view about existence

but must also be precise and clear enough for social workers to be able to apply it in their practice (Senreich, 2013). Some definitions are simple, such as that put forth by Gardner (2020), who defines spirituality as "that which gives life meaning; including a sense of something beyond or greater than the self" (p. 73). While these types of definitions are broad enough to encapsulate a variety of perspectives, they may be too vague to provide enough meaning to inform practice.

Another aspect of spirituality that is debated in social work discourse is whether it is an interior or exterior construct. Hodge (2012) states that spirituality is primarily an individual's relationship with God or the transcendent, and is therefore "an interior, existential construct" (p. 33). However, Zapf (2005) cautions against social work approaching spirituality as mainly a personal characteristic, while neglecting the importance of connection with others, environment, and nature that is part of many belief systems.

For the purposes of this research, I will use a definition that is broad enough to be inclusive of a variety of different belief systems. This approach supports clients' right to determine what spirituality means to them, which is consistent with a clients' right to self-determination as stated in Value 1 in the Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW, 2005) Code of Ethics: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons. However, I seek a definition that is also detailed enough to provide meaning and structure to the ways in which it can be applied in practice. Therefore, the definition of spirituality I will be using for this research will be taken from Canda et al. (2020) due to both its inclusivity and specificity. This definition also acknowledges that spirituality expands beyond the individual and includes other relationships:

> A process of human life and development focusing on the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and well-being; *in relationship* with oneself, other people, other beings, the universe, and ultimate reality however understood (e.g., in animistic, atheistic, nontheistic, polytheistic, theistic, or other ways); orienting around centrally significant priorities; and engaging a sense of transcendence (i.e., experience of what is deeply profound, sacred, or transpersonal). (p. 96)

When I refer to spirituality, I include religion as one of many possible expressions of spirituality.

Spirituality in Social Work

The existing literature supports the relevance of spirituality in social work practice. Spirituality can play a large part in the healing process for some individuals. For example, a study by Starnino and Sullivan (2016) identified that some individuals who had experienced childhood trauma found that spirituality helped them cope later in life, through spiritual insight and meaning making; establishing a sense of coherence; rebuilding their perception of the world; and posttraumatic growth. O'Rourke's (2010) case study of an individual who used sacred objects, prayer, and ritual in their process of healing from childhood sexual abuse, concluded that healing "inevitably involves exploring the existential and spiritual issues that surface in the process of working through the betrayal by one's loved and trusted primary caregivers" (p. 305). There has been a growing recognition in Western society of the need for a more holistic approach to treating trauma (Duros & Crawley, 2014), leading to a rise in holistic alternatives to traditional talk therapy such as yoga, mindfulness, and meditation (Justice et al., 2018; Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016; Nolan, 2016).

Spirituality is not only important to many clients but is also salient for many social work practitioners (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016). In fact, a significant number of social

workers were motivated by their faith to enter the field initially but are often then asked by instructors and field supervisors to disregard their spiritual or religious beliefs in the name of professional and ethical practice (Hohn et al., 2017). While this may be a well-intentioned effort to prevent the very real risk of a practitioner's own beliefs being imposed on a client, Hohn et al. (2017) reinforce that the profession is "largely neglectful, or downright hostile" towards religious social workers who wish to bring their faith to their practice, and that results in a lost opportunity to draw on this strength within practitioners (p. 4). Spirituality may also allow practitioners to connect with clients, "whether faith-informed words are spoken or not" (Hohn et al., 2017, p. 4). Bringing spirituality into education and training is important in helping students develop self-awareness and appropriate boundaries (Hohn et al., 2017).

A survey by Larsen (2011) of 225 social workers in the United States examining practitioners' personal spiritual beliefs, their attitudes towards the use of spirituality in practice, and factors that might predict their use of spiritual interventions indicated that almost all (93.7%) respondents considered themselves spiritual, with most believing in God or a higher power and more than half specifically identifying as religious. The results of this study also indicated that spiritual beliefs were particularly important to respondents who identified as People of Colour (Larsen, 2011). Some practitioners from the sample were incorporating spirituality into their practice; additionally, more than half stated that their spiritual beliefs influenced their practice and almost half reported that their practice influenced their personal spiritual development (Larsen, 2011).

In a photovoice study by Mulder (2015), 10 social work students in the United States shared that they felt the mission and values of social work aligned well with those of their spiritual beliefs, including assisting those in need, uplifting humanity, the importance of

relationships, and treating others with respect. They also noted the need for openness and inclusiveness toward other beliefs and learning from those with whom they worked (Mulder, 2015). Though participants were students with little paid experience in the field, students noted the need for boundaries to ensure they would not impose their beliefs on clients (Mulder, 2015). Mulder (2015) cautioned that because the participants were students, and not practitioners with experience, much of their responses were hypothetical and highlighted the need to include spirituality in social work curriculum.

The acknowledgement of spirituality in the social work profession in a deep and meaningful way can be important not only for clients who wish to receive holistic services, but also for practitioners who wish to bring their spiritual beliefs to their work. Rather than asking practitioners to set aside these fundamental beliefs in their professional role, it would be beneficial to open this discussion and help practitioners develop self-awareness, consider potential ethical issues, and maintain professional boundaries (Hohn et al., 2017).

The recent increase in interest and research on the inclusion of spirituality within social work has led scholars to advance incorporating spirituality into social work at a broad, conceptual level (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Crisp, 2020; Gardner, 2020; Zapf, 2005). Belcher and Sarmiento Mellinger (2016) advocate for a broader discussion of spirituality that frames the topic through key aspects of human nature and links spirituality with social justice. Gardner (2020) also states the importance of moving forward with implementing spirituality within the social work profession in a way that is consistent with the principles of social justice. Crisp (2020) acknowledges the benefits of including spirituality in social work practice, but also cautions that there are ways in which doing so could actually be harmful; for example, an individualistic focus on spirituality can obfuscate the broader systemic oppressions

people may be experiencing. Zapf (2005) suggests that social work may have much to learn about spirituality from other approaches to helping, particularly Indigenous approaches.

Many social workers have also written about the incorporation of spirituality at the micro level of social work. Jacobs (2015) proposes that the key to spirituality in direct practice lies in "contemplative spaces" – which she defines as quiet, still spaces that allow for reflection and connection (p. 150). Seinfeld (2012) states that some practice principles that derive from spirituality are "mindfulness, gratitude, forgiveness, radical acceptance, hitting bottom, redemption and surrendering the ego to a higher power" (p. 243). Social work practitioners can also incorporate spirituality by understanding that suffering is a part of life and approaching that understanding with radical acceptance (Seinfeld, 2012).

This body of literature has not been without critique. Crisp (2020) references the ongoing discussions of spirituality in social work by pointing out a lack of consensus around the understanding of spirituality, including whether it can be measured, and the need for broadening the place of spirituality in the profession to extend to social policy and advocacy work. Barker and Floersch (2010) also contend that greater discussion and consensus around the definition of spirituality within social work is needed.

Several scholars have also proposed spiritual practice frameworks. For example, Carrington's (2013) Integrated Spiritual Practice Framework for social work is based on the following three concepts: The Triadic Whole, which represents the ontological view that multiple physical and spiritual realities are the sum of the ultimate reality; Operational Quadrants of creating balance between the masculine/feminine and physical/spiritual; and Levels of Vibrational Energy or Consciousness, which are physical, emotional, mental, heart, communicational, celestial, and ketheric. Whiting (2013) presents Gandhian social work as a

model of spiritual social work, which is based on the following concepts: *ahimsa,* which means non-violence or fighting for peace; *satyagraha,* meaning soul-force; *bramacharya,* meaning restraint; material simplicity; *swadesh,* or self-sufficiency; and materiality/sacramentality, meaning that the material is the spiritual. Keenan (2010) explores how clinical practitioners can encounter intense reactions and defensive postures when including spirituality in their practice, and she recommends engaging in personal reflective or spiritual practices themselves. Lord (2010) offers “meditative dialogue” as a means for practitioners to “cultivate sacred space” in their practice and in their lives (p. 282). Whitworth et al. (2019) suggest that spirituality can also play an important role in practitioners’ self-care and help them avoid stress and burnout by avoiding the “results trap,” the belief that social workers control and are responsible for clients’ outcomes (p. 217).

For some people, spirituality has meaning in their lives in the form of religion, and an understanding of its role should be reflected in practice with clients who identify as religious. For example, Limb et al. (2018) state that social work practice with clients from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must include culturally competent spiritual assessments, including adding a spiritual dimension to genograms. Practitioners should also consider collaborating with religious supports such as church activities, mentorship, youth groups, and religious leaders (Tangenberg, 2012). Guillory (2010) posits that African American Spiritualist churches in the United States are a “viable therapeutic enterprise addressing certain psychological disruptions” (p. 65).

For other people, spirituality is intertwined with their culture. Social workers work with people from diverse cultures, including immigrants/newcomers. Spirituality is often integral to the worldview and experiences of those from non-Western cultures (Pesek et al., 2006).

Traditional cultures from around the world, which “live in a harmonious and sustainable fashion” that honours the land they live on, are varied but remarkably similar in their focus on balance and interconnectedness (Pesek et al., 2006, p. 115). Some scholars propose the need for social workers to include spirituality in their work with migrants and refugees through a non-judgmental, collaborative, and client-centred approach, although they acknowledge most practitioners are little equipped to do so (George & Ellison, 2015; Hodge, 2019; Whipple et al., 2015). For instance, traditional social work practice that ignores Islamic spiritual resources may be significantly less effective with Muslim clients, and practitioners must have a knowledge of Islam and Islamic concepts and terms to work effectively with this population (Hall et al., 2011; Pathan, 2016).

Understanding an Indigenous worldview is also critically important in social work practice due to the past and ongoing colonial practices in Canada, including in the social work profession (Lavallee & Poole, 2010). Disregarding Indigenous ways of knowing in social work practice can continue to perpetuate harm (Lavallee & Poole, 2010). The Indigenous worldview is holistic and includes the well-being of spirit, body, mind, and emotions (Baskin, 2016). These four realms are often depicted in the Medicine Wheel and cannot be understood separately; they require balance (Lavallee & Poole, 2010). An Indigenous understanding of health and well-being also includes connection to others, the environment, one’s purpose, belonging, and one’s place in the universe or Creation (Baskin, 2016; Linklater, 2014). From an Indigenous perspective, all trauma has a spiritual impact (Duran & Firehammer, 2016; Lavallee & Poole, 2010) and “all healing is ultimately spiritual healing” (Mehl-Madrona, 2009, p. 27). Indigenous spirituality is also deeply connected to land and place. Western social work has much to learn from the Indigenous perspective (Crisp, 2020; Zapf, 2005).

This existing body of literature supports the importance of addressing spirituality in social work, which is a key premise of my study. I have outlined some of the scholarship proposing various ways that the profession could incorporate spirituality, but my study aims to explore some of the ways individual practitioners are already using it.

Cultural Humility

Some scholars see the inclusion of spirituality in practice as an issue of cultural competence, with some naming spiritual competence as a specific subsect (Cole, 2021). Canda et al. (2020) state that cultural competence is an approach that:

> …appreciates complexity and intersectionality of identities that critically reflects on power and privilege in helping relationships while promoting collaboration and empowerment, attends to contextual issues of social justice, and encourages workers' continuous learning through self-awareness and dialogue with clients and their communities. (p. 23)

Cultural competence does not position the practitioner as an expert in other cultures but encourages an ongoing process of learning and developing relationships (Canda et al., 2020). Some scholars prefer different terms for this concept, such as cultural humility, because it does not imply that the practitioner has a particular level of skill or expertise (Danso, 2018). I would also advocate for the use of the term cultural humility rather than cultural competence because it clearly implies that the practitioner is not the expert on others' cultures and thus can never be fully competent in this area. Regardless of the term used, spirituality can be an important aspect of cultural competence or awareness (Canda et al., 2020).

Hodge and Bushfield (2006) define spiritual competence as an "active, ongoing process" of developing the three following areas: awareness of one's own values, worldview,

assumptions, and biases; a non-judgmental understanding of the client's worldview; and the use of interventions that are appropriate and sensitive to the client's spiritual beliefs (p. 106). Like cultural competence, spiritual competence is not a static state, but the ongoing development of certain attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Hodge & Bushfield, 2006). The framework of cultural humility further emphasizes the need to address spirituality within social work practice.

Social Justice

Social justice is a core value of the social work profession. It is also a tenet of many faith traditions, particularly in the area of economic justice, and religious organizations have often been advocates of and supporters of the poor and disadvantaged (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016). Social justice can be seen as supported by many spiritual traditions (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Hodge, 2012; Prior & Quinn, 2012). Religion was an important part of the origin of social work as a profession, such as through the work of Jane Addams, an early feminist and social justice activist (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Lee & Barrett, 2007). The profession also developed in response to other injustices of the time (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Lee & Barrett, 2007).

Some practitioners may be motivated to enter the field due to their own faith or spirituality and be motivated by it to pursue social change and social justice (Hodge, 2012; Hutchison, 2012; Lee & Barrett, 2007; Prior & Quinn, 2012); however, there may also be some tensions between the profession's view of social justice and the beliefs of some faith traditions (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016). In fact, some scholars also argue that religions tend to support the status quo and are therefore antithetical to social justice (Sheridan, 2009). Spirituality may also be important to clients' conceptualizations of social justice. Hodge (2012) cautions that

practitioners should understand how their clients understand social justice in order to advocate for them, although these understandings may differ from those of the dominant secular culture.

I would also argue that the incorporation of spirituality in social work is a social justice issue due to Canada's history of oppressing groups specifically in relation to their spirituality, such as Indigenous peoples. As such, social workers should be prepared to acknowledge, respect, and honour the spiritual beliefs and practices of their clients as much as the clients are comfortable. Practitioners and the profession, as a whole, should be equipped to understand and respect other worldviews and ways of knowing in an appropriate and ethical manner, rather than imposing a secular, Western worldview on these oppressed groups.

Specific Populations

There is an accumulating body of research that focuses on spirituality in specific areas of social work practice with various populations. For instance, social workers in hospice settings frequently provide spiritual care to clients (Duncan-Daston et al., 2016). However, this approach to care is largely not grounded in theory and instead draws on personal resources, experiences, and interests, which leads to concerns about competency, particularly on the part of the practitioners themselves (Duncan-Daston et al., 2016; Leichty, 2013). Spirituality, for example, can be helpful for a strengths-based approach to working with youth by exploring meaning and identity, development toward adulthood, risk factors, and personal and environmental resources (Cheon & Canda, 2010). Walker et al. (2010) posit that religion and spirituality can be incorporated into trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy for children and youth. Pandya (2017) found that customized spiritual interventions for children could address depressive symptoms, but that diversity of religious and spiritual belief systems needs to be considered. Spirituality and religion can also enhance social work practice with populations such as veterans

and service members (Foley et al., 2016) and in community practice (Hill & Donaldson, 2012). This research indicates that spirituality may have particular meaning or benefit for certain populations, and this is an area to be further explored.

Practitioners' Perspectives

An emerging body of research has sought the perspectives of social work practitioners on spirituality. Pandya's (2016) study of 1389 medical social workers from 12 countries, including Canada, showed that in general respondents favoured the use of spirituality in hospital settings. Those with spiritual training and those with higher reported spirituality were more likely to view spirituality as an integral part of healing and wellness (Pandya, 2016). A study of 126 practitioners in the United States indicated that a high rate of social workers in the sample agreed with the appropriateness of a various different spiritual interventions (Dwyer, 2010). Those who incorporated spirituality in their practice appeared to focus on client-determination and ethical guidelines while doing so and appeared to adhere to Canda and Furman's (1999, as cited in Dwyer, 2010) guidelines to working with the sacred realm, with the notable exception that they do not make referrals to or collaborate with religious or spiritual counselors and programs.

A study of 283 clinical social workers in the United States indicated an overall favourable attitude toward the use of spirituality in work with youth, but the vast majority of respondents reported that they rarely, if ever, received any guidance on this topic in their education and training (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010). Oxhandler and Ellor's (2017) study of 444 social workers in the United States indicated an openness to integrating religion/spirituality into their practice, but these practitioners were actually doing so at a lower rate, which the authors posited was linked to a lack of training. Similarly, findings from another study of 442 social workers in the United States indicated that they were overall open to using religion/spirituality in practice but

there were low levels of implementation; levels of implementation were linked to the practitioner's own intrinsic religiosity and prior training (Oxhandler et al., 2015). A US national survey of 329 social workers indicated that factors that helped participants incorporate religion/spirituality into their practice are personal religion, education, and having a religious/spiritually sensitive practice (Oxhandler & Giardina, 2017). Barriers named by respondents were that it was not relevant, lack of training, client discouraging the topic, or being afraid that religion/spirituality was a taboo topic (Oxhandler & Giardina, 2017).

Although most of the research on spirituality/religion in social work is conducted in the US context, there are a few notable exceptions. For instance, a study of 307 social workers and social service workers working with youth in Ontario found respondents to be generally favourable towards the use of religion/spirituality with this population. They reported using a wide variety of spiritually based interventions despite over two-thirds stating that their education "never" or "rarely" included this content (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018). Barriers to using spirituality in practice with youth were lack of knowledge and experience, concerns about imposing own bias, disapproval of caregivers, and a lack of agency or supervisor support (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018). There is a need for further research with practitioners within the Canadian context, and the Albertan context specifically. Social workers' individual practice will be influenced by the particular societal and professional context they are working within. Social work is regulated provincially, and each province has its own standards of practice and registration requirements.

The common theme throughout this body of research is the agreement between researchers and social work practitioners that spirituality is important in practice, but the education to do so is largely lacking and thus integrating spirituality into practice is not being

widely implemented. Jacobs' (2010) study with 40 experienced clinicians in the United States who have integrated religion/spirituality into their practice is a notable exception. However, the clinicians in Jacobs' (2010) study rarely used specific spiritual assessment tools or consultation with religious leaders; instead, they used mindfulness techniques and contemplative practices; stressed the importance of paying attention, listening, and reflecting; were open and fluid with their definitions and understanding of religion/spirituality with clients; and most approached spirituality in practice through their theoretical orientation (psychodynamic perspective). Hohn et al. (2017) also conducted a qualitative study with six Christian social workers in the United States who have incorporated their faith into their practice. Two major themes emerged. The first was God's design of person and life calling, in which participants reflected on God's plan for them and their calling to the mission of their organization; the second was organizational issues, wherein the participants felt motivated to continue working there despite issues such as limited resources and a disconnect between staff and management (Hohn et al., 2017). The participants in the study found the use of spirituality in their work to be empowering for themselves but emphasized the importance of a client-centred approach that does not impose the practitioner's beliefs on the client (Hohn et al., 2017).

While there is existing research that seeks the perspectives of social work practitioners on the topic of spirituality, much of this research is quantitative with only a few qualitative studies available in the literature. Hohn et al.'s (2017) qualitative study sought the perspectives of practitioners using spirituality in practice, but it only included Christian social workers at one particular organization located in the United States and was focused more on the experience of the practitioners rather than the specifics of how they implement this approach in their work. Jacobs' (2010) study with experienced practitioners, described above, is similar to my thesis

research, with a number of notable differences. Conducted more than a decade ago, Jacobs' (2010) study was from the United States; data was collected via focus groups, rather than via individual interviews; participants were exclusively clinical practitioners, while my study was open to practitioners in other areas of practice; and the primary research question was whether spirituality has a place in social work practice. My study, in contrast, is based on the premise that spirituality does have a place in social work practice.

Ethical Considerations

Although there has been little discussion about ethical guidelines pertaining to spirituality in social work published literature (Canda et al., 2004; Carrington, 2013), the research reviewed for the purposes of this thesis indicates that practitioners are using it in their practice despite the lack of guidance. This situation may give rise to a number of ethical issues, including the imposition of spiritual beliefs or activities on clients, practitioner bias against certain spiritual beliefs, blurring of professional boundaries, trying to include too much in the social work curriculum already, and proselytization (Canda et al., 2004; Sheridan, 2009). For example, a mixed-methods study by Canda et al. (2004) of 2069 social workers in the United States showed that participants varied on what they considered appropriate spiritually oriented activities in practice, with the most controversial activities being use of prayer, healing touch, and self-disclosure of spiritual beliefs. Some ethical concerns noted by the study researchers were the use of private prayer about a client without their informed consent, participants who were completely opposed to self-disclosure, and a small number of comments that specifically seemed to be negatively predisposed towards Christianity.

Although somewhat dated, Sheridan's (2009) review of the literature also indicates that both social work practitioners and students are using spiritual interventions despite receiving

little to no education or training on the topic, and do not appear to be following any particular ethical guidelines in this regard. Sheridan (2009) recommended that this be addressed through social work education programs, continuing education efforts in social work agencies, further research, and a commitment among social workers to continue the dialogue on "the appropriate role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education" (p. 121). This body of literature presents an ethical imperative for exploring the ways practitioners might be using spirituality in their work.

Spirituality in Social Work Education

Despite the lack of spirituality in social work education, some studies have advocated for its inclusion (Buckey, 2012; Phillips, 2016; Senreich, 2013). A survey of 15,067 social work students from 12 countries showed that students viewed spirituality and spiritually sensitive interventions as useful for practice and should be included in the curricula (Pandya, 2018). The inclusion of spiritual tenets from assessments to intervention and linking traditional social work practice goals to spiritual intervention goals was also highlighted (Pandya, 2018). Buckey's (2012) review of 493 articles indicated that both social work students and practitioners often reported little to no training in this area, though students were very supportive of this material being included in education.

Although a limited body of research has examined the impact of spirituality training in social work education, some insights have been brought forward. Phillips (2016) conducted a qualitative study of the spiritual experiences of non-Maori social work students completing a social work program in New Zealand that was designed specifically to incorporate spirituality, due to concerns about social work's ability to meet the needs of Maori clients. The study found that the program deepened the students' own spirituality, which then translated to their practice.

Additionally, some studies have found that social work educators favour the inclusion of spirituality in social work education. For instance, a survey of 190 Canadian social work educators indicated that faculty were largely in favour of including religion/spirituality in social work practice and education, reflected through fairly high ratings on the Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice scale developed by Sheridan (2008, as cited in Kvarfordt et al., 2018). However, only one-third reported this content is included in their BSW or MSW curriculum, and usually at the discretion of the instructor (Kvarfordt et al., 2018). Concerns raised about including this content in curriculum included the possibility of bias by faculty or students and the lack of knowledge or experience in teaching this content among faculty (Kvarfordt et al., 2018). Street and Moyle (2019) also emphasize the need for field supervisors to discuss spirituality with practicum students and to help them manage their personal religious and spiritual beliefs in practice.

According to Cole (2021), integrating spirituality into social work curriculum has been a topic of discussion for the past three decades, with support from students, educators, and practitioners, yet this remains a gap in education. According to studies in the United States, when spirituality is included in social work programs, it typically lacks depth or is only offered through elective courses, typically at the graduate level (Cole, 2021). Several recommendations to address this need have been proposed. Senreich (2013), for instance, advocates for teaching a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework to students, as the bio-psycho-social framework that is currently taught neglects the necessary aspect of “a person’s subjective relationship with what is unknowable about existence” (p. 549). Barker and Floersch (2010) propose that education on spirituality should focus on building self-awareness in students around spirituality and its potential impact on their practice. Buckey (2012) also recommends promoting student self-

awareness around spirituality, along with including spirituality theory, the use of empirical assessments, and linking to social work core competencies in social work curriculum.

In contrast to this opinion, there are also those scholars who oppose the integration of spirituality into curriculum (Cole, 2021). Their concerns include violation of the separation between church and state and the difficulty of conducting empirical research on spirituality to support evidence-based practice in this area (Cole, 2021). However, proponents of the inclusion of spirituality in social work curriculum suggest that the principle of separation between church and state would only be violated if educators were proselytizing or converting students, and spirituality's complexity is precisely the reason that it requires further attention (Cole, 2021).

Conclusion

There is a large body of literature supporting the importance of spirituality in social work practice. It is also an issue of cultural humility and social justice, especially for social workers working with Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized peoples. Further, an emerging body of research exploring the perspectives of practitioners, indicates that practitioners would like to incorporate spirituality in their work but do not feel prepared to do so due to a lack of education and training. This lack of preparation may pose some ethical concerns.

My study is premised on the belief that spirituality does have a place in social work practice and seeks to gain insight from social work practitioners from a variety of areas of practice who are already implementing it, within the specific context of Alberta. There is a lack of existing literature exploring the experiences of social workers already using spirituality in their practice within Canada. This study seeks to inform social work curriculum within schools of social work in Alberta based directly on the insights and perspectives of practitioners.

Chapter 3. Methods

This chapter begins with my purpose statement and research questions for this study, which I arrived at both through my own practice experience and my review of the literature. I will then outline the paradigm from which I am approaching this topic – pragmatism – as well as the key social work theories that inform my perspective: strengths-based, person in environment, transpersonal theory, and relevant social work values. I will explain how these theories fit together and support my understanding of spirituality in social work and the creation of this study. Finally, I will explain my chosen methodology, interpretive description, and detail the procedures I followed in conducting this research with respect to researcher reflexivity, sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, credibility, and ethical considerations.

Purpose Statement/Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perspectives of social work practitioners in Alberta who actively incorporate spirituality into their practice. My research questions are: How are social work practitioners incorporating spirituality into their direct practice with service users? and What informs their use of spirituality in their practice and supports their competence in this area?

Research Methodology

Paradigm

The paradigm informing this research is pragmatism. If research paradigms can be viewed on a spectrum, pragmatism falls somewhere in the middle between positivism and social constructivism; it contends that there is an objective reality, but it can only be encountered through human experiences (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Pragmatism began as a philosophical movement because some scholars rejected the idea that social science inquiry can only

understand reality through the scientific method (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Pragmatism focuses on the nature of experience rather than the nature of reality and aims to remain grounded in the real world, focusing on social action and outcomes rather than abstract philosophical debates about the nature of reality (Lushin & Anastas, 2011; Morgan, 2014). Knowledge is not an abstract, theoretical concept regarding the relationship between the researcher and subject but is a continual interaction between beliefs and action (Morgan, 2014). Within pragmatism, practical usefulness is the main measure of truth (Lushin & Anastas, 2011), and the meaning of observations made through research are assessed based on their usefulness and links to outcomes (Dewey, 1938). With this focus on outcomes and utility in mind, researchers should use the approach that works best for the particular research problem (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

I believe that pragmatism is a good fit for social work research, as it aligns with many core social work values. It is action-oriented, problem-focused, promotes a pluralistic view, is practical, and draws on practice wisdom (Hothersall, 2019; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). One of the original proponents of pragmatism, John Dewey, was a colleague of Jane Addams, the forbearer of modern social work (Hothersall, 2019; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). As such, his work was influential on the emerging social work profession and Jane Addams incorporated many elements of the philosophy of pragmatism – a commitment to freedom and equality and an action-oriented approach to social justice – into her work (Borden, 2013; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Dewey (1910/2008) also asserted that there is no clear boundary between research and everyday life; research is just a more carefully conducted response to a problem. For me, this topic has a strong connection to practice, and the inspiration and purpose comes from my own practice experience. Additionally, my motivation for pursuing this topic and making decisions about my research questions, methodology, etc. is driven by what is useful and practical, which

is why the purpose of this study was to learn more about how practitioners are already using spirituality in their practice.

Theoretical Framework

My research is grounded in social work values as well as three additional theories. As a registered social worker, I think that grounding social work research in social work values is essential, just as I would in my practice. My research supports Value 1 in the Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW, 2005) Code of Ethics, Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons. It states that social workers must "uphold each person's right to self-determination" (p. 4), and the people that social workers serve have the right to determine what is important to them, how they understand wellness, and the type of supports they receive. Being able to provide holistic services and practice in a way that is sensitive to the client's worldview is critical to supporting client self-determination.

Value 2, the Pursuit of Social Justice, is also relevant to this study (CASW, 2005). Spirituality is integral to an Indigenous worldview (Baskin, 2016), as well as that of many other cultures that have been marginalized. Given the history of oppression in Canada towards Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups, including with respect to their cultural and spiritual practices, this topic is a social justice issue. Social workers should not only be aware of this history but also be prepared to work with these groups competently and appropriately.

Being able to incorporate spirituality competently and ethically into practice if the client wishes is also aligned with Value 6, Competence in Professional Practice (CASW, 2005). According to Value 6, practitioners must maintain their professional proficiency and "uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service possible" (p. 8). If practitioners like me

lack training in this area and do not feel competent in addressing spirituality in their practice, that presents a knowledge gap that needs to be addressed.

I have also been influenced in my approach by two key social work theories: strengths-based and person in environment. The strengths-based approach focuses on identifying and using existing resources and strengths, counter to the dominant deficit-based model (Rapp et al., 2005). This approach can also be traced to Jane Addams, whose writing placed an emphasis on strengths in social work (Rapp et al., 2005). It was further developed through empowerment literature in the work of Paulo Friere and others, as well as through multicultural and feminist frameworks (Rapp et al., 2005). The premise of the strengths-based approach is that people do better when they are assisted in identifying and using their existing strengths and resources, which sounds simple but can be difficult to enact because it is often counter to the deficit-based model that dominates most practice contexts (Blundo, 2001; Graybeal, 2001; Rapp et al., 2005). The strengths-based approach is goal-oriented, systematic in its assessment of strengths, sees a person's environment as rich in resources, is hope-inducing, and gives clients the authority to make meaningful choices (Rapp et al., 2005). The client is the expert and the source of change, rather than the professional (Blundo, 2001).

I believe that this approach can be applied in research as well as practice, especially when a problem has already been identified. It is clear from my review of the existing literature on this topic that there is a problem – many social workers want to use spirituality in their practice but do not feel adequately prepared. Adopting a strengths-based perspective allows me to identify social work practitioners who are using spirituality in their practice, how they are doing so, and what is working well for them and conversely, the existing gaps. The research participants (in

this case service providers rather than service users) are the experts who can provide insight and drive change in the profession, rather than the researcher.

Another key social work theory that influenced my approach to this topic is person in environment, which “emphasizes social work knowledge and skills that improve the contextual goodness-of-fit, mutual transactions between, and adaptations of individuals and their environment” (Rogge & Cox, 2001, p. 49). It is considered a hallmark of the profession and has been since social work’s inception (Akesson et al., 2017). The person in environment approach states that we must consider a person within their context. In its original conceptualization this approach is somewhat limited. For example, Zapf (2005) recommends expanding the person in environment approach scope beyond our immediate environments to include our interconnectedness and spirituality. Spirituality is often regarded within social work as an individual trait, but Zapf (2005) proposes that we should consider it in a broader context, as he contends that within many other cultures, such as Indigenous cultures, spirituality begins with a sense of interconnectedness, rather than viewing it primarily as an individual quality (Zapf, 2005). This sense of interconnectedness does not only include other people, but also nature, place, and land (Zapf, 2005; 2008). Western social work tends to neglect these aspects of environment, and furthermore, understands person and environment as two separate entities, with the emphasis on the person (Zapf, 2005). This may not be consistent with many worldviews.

While some argue that the person in environment model should be expanded to provide a holistic framework for understanding an individual’s particular context, others advance that this framework is simply too broad to effectively guide social work practice (Akesson et al., 2017). While there may be debate over its utility in guiding day-to-day social work practice (Rogge & Cox, 2001), I propose that the person in environment model remains useful on a conceptual level

for understanding this topic. For many, spirituality is a key part of their environment, in terms of their beliefs and practices, and any spiritual, religious, or cultural groups to which they belong. It may inform their interactions with other parts of their environment, including their relationships with others in their life. If we fail to acknowledge this aspect of environment as a profession, I believe, we are missing key information about people's contexts and lives.

The final theory that informs my approach is transpersonal theory. Transpersonal theory, which originated within psychology in the 1970s from psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Jung, informs modern day conceptualizations of spirituality by expanding wellness beyond traditional Western models of mental health (Canda et al., 2020). Transpersonal theory espouses a holistic view of the individual that includes mind, body, and spirit, situated within the social and natural environment (Canda et al., 2020). Canda et al. (2020) further note that this theory offers a "vantage on human experience, development, and helping that focuses on our highest potential for creativity, love, spiritual awareness, and connectedness" (p. 247). It is distinguished from previous theories of psychology by expanding the view of human consciousness beyond the traditional boundaries of ego and time/space and, in doing so, recognized that humans are capable of "non-ordinary, mystical, spiritual states of consciousness" (Besthorn, 2001, p. 27). Transpersonal theory posits that ignoring these aspects of human experience may inhibit client's development or even result in misdiagnosis (Besthorn, 2001). Ken Wilber (1977, 1983, 1986, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998), one of the movement's prominent theorists, also asserts that human evolution is not restricted to biological and cultural elements, but also includes continually increasing levels of individual and collective spirituality and consciousness (as cited in Besthorn, 2001). However, most transpersonal theorists did not see

this type of progress as inevitable, suggesting that this advancement would require a shift in personal and societal thought and action (Besthorn, 2001).

This shift in perspective about the kinds of experiences and states of consciousness that humans are capable of distinguished mental wellness and functioning from spirituality, though the two are certainly connected. Transpersonal theory also emphasizes both individual and collective spirituality and rejects the division between person and nature that Zapf (2005) also takes issue with in his critique of social work's person in environment approach. As such, transpersonal theory serves to foreground my understanding of and approach to this topic, as it expands our understanding of human experience to include the mystical and transcendent. Ignoring this aspect of human experience or simply relegating it to the mental, social, or emotional realms, I argue, diminishes the experiences of those with whom we work.

Methodological Approach

In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews with seven social work practitioners in Alberta who identify as using spirituality in their practice (the full inclusion criteria is detailed in the Sample section). I believe that a qualitative approach was the most useful given that there is limited existing qualitative research on this topic in the literature; also, a qualitative approach is the best way to obtain insight into the strengths of these practitioners since qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews allow the participant to provide detail, nuance, and complexity in their descriptions of their experience (Goodman, 2001).

The method of inquiry I used was interpretive description. Interpretive description, first developed in nursing research, remains most widely used in that discipline (Hunt, 2009; Thorne, 2016). Nurse researchers found that the traditional qualitative methods of inquiry such as phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory that had been developed within other

disciplines were too rigid for inquiries within nursing and other applied health disciplines (Thorne et al., 1997). Interpretive description is a non-categorical description that draws on the principles of the applied discipline; it is informed by clinical practice knowledge and conducted with the aim of informing practice knowledge in a specific context (Thorne et al., 1997). It is still a new and developing method of inquiry that has not been widely used within social work specifically but has been used in the social services more broadly. One example of its use within social work is a study by Shaw et al. (2018), conducted in Alberta, that explored the readiness of health care practitioners, families, and residents in supportive living to engage in advance care planning. Interpretive description aligns with my chosen paradigm of pragmatism and my desire to draw from and inform social work practice because interpretive description is based on a real-world question and seeks to answer it within the specific context of an applied discipline (Thorne, 2016).

Interpretive description requires that the researcher describes “the background knowledge and disciplinary orientation” that they are bringing into the study; this is referred to as “theoretical scaffolding” (Thorne, 2016, p. 60). The first part of theoretical scaffolding is the literature review. As I outlined in the previous chapter, my review of the relevant existing research on spirituality in social work helped to refine my research questions and inform my approach to the topic. The second component of theoretical scaffolding is the theory or theories that the researcher is employing in understanding this topic, as well as positioning the study within the discipline it is meant to inform (Thorne, 2016). I have outlined above the social work theories and values that I believe justify the need for research on this topic, and how this study specifically can aid the profession in the pursuit of its mission and values. This component of theoretical scaffolding can also include personal positioning and reflection on the part of the

researcher insofar that it is relevant and necessary to understand the researcher's motivations and any potential biases (Thorne, 2016), which is detailed in the following section.

Some concerns and limitations of interpretive description as a research methodology include its added "pragmatic obligation"; because interpretive description is done within the context of a specific discipline and with an intended audience in mind, researchers must be aware that any findings could end up being applied in practice and "no new idea should be understood as purely theoretical and therefore incapable of rendering harm" (Thorne, 2016, p. 237). Another limitation of this approach is that because it relies on the researcher's background knowledge, credibility is heavily contingent on the researcher's level of analytical engagement and reflexivity. Thompson Burdine et al. (2021) state that "the integrity in an ID study rests on the shoulders of the researcher to adequately account for their decisions: choosing what to include, what to leave out, what to notice and what to ignore" (p. 342). In spite of these limitations, I believe interpretive description to be the most suitable method of inquiry for this study.

Researcher Reflexivity

As interpretive description was developed for applied disciplines and allows for the presence of practice knowledge, it is imperative to be aware of and reflect on the ideas and assumptions you may be bringing from practice in your particular discipline (Thorne, 2016). My practice experience and desire for this type of knowledge to inform my practice inspired my interest in pursuing this topic for my thesis research. I hold some assumptions and beliefs about this topic, which I identified through self-reflection before beginning my research including:

- Spirituality/religion is important to many individuals and therefore social work practitioners must be prepared to include this in their practice;

- An awareness of the history/context of Alberta, and oppression that has occurred in this area (e.g., towards Indigenous peoples, Muslims, etc.);
- Spirituality/religion is defined by the service user, who determines the manner/extent of its presence in the services they receive (including not to engage with spirituality at all); and
- My approach to this topic is grounded in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics.

I assumed that other practitioners would have a similar approach to how they viewed/incorporated spirituality in practice but remained open to different perspectives.

I consider myself spiritual though I was not raised within a strong faith or practice in any particular religion or spiritual belief system and am open to many different worldviews. However, I was raised and continue to live in Alberta, and must be aware of the specific context and influence of the society in which I live. Reflection of potential biases and preconceptions must be ongoing and occur at every step of the research process in order to make sure they are not having undue influence. I also recognize that others may have different perspectives due to different backgrounds.

Sample

The following inclusion criteria was used in recruiting participants. Study participants were required to:

- Be registered social workers currently practicing in Alberta;
- Have at least five years post-graduate experience (diploma or degree);
- Work primarily with adults in their professional practice; and
- Self-identify as intentionally and regularly using spirituality in their practice.

The intention of this criteria was to find practitioners who have developed ways to actively incorporate spirituality into their practice with adults, within the particular context of Alberta. Five years post-graduate experience was required in order to find participants who had had the opportunity to actively implement spirituality into their practice, rather than just begun the process. My assumption was that doing so would take some time since spirituality is limited in social work education or training, and this is something practitioners would have to seek out much of this clinical information guiding this practice on their own. Working primarily with adults was specified so as not to include children or youth, for whom spirituality might manifest differently. No specific client group was further specified because this is an exploratory study. Further, the literature review did not indicate any specific group that warranted further examination, and little is known about the use of spirituality in social work in Alberta in general.

Interpretive description is not prescriptive of sample size; in fact, Thorne (2016) advises that samples can consist of almost any size if adequately justified by the researcher, although the vast majority of studies are likely to include between five and 30 participants. Saturation, or the point at which no new information can be found in the data, is a key criterion for determining sample size in qualitative inquiry (Guest et al., 2006). With the aim of providing practical guidance for the concept of saturation, Guest et al. (2006) systematically documented the degree of data saturation and variability during the process of thematic analysis. Using data from a study involving 60 in-depth interviews with women in two West African countries, the researchers were able to reach saturation after 12 interviews, with basic elements for metathemes (higher order themes) present after six interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

Although much of the relevant research to guide this study comes from nursing, some studies on this topic are within social services research. The studies used for comparison all

include in-depth interviews with practitioners about a particular aspect of practice. Of the seven studies found in the area of social sciences, one had 10 participants (Karageorge et al., 2018), two had 11 participants (Smith et al., 2020; Williams & Haverkamp, 2015), two had 12 participants (Dreher-Hummel et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2015), one had 15 participants (Hunt, 2009), and one had 21 participants (Bindley et al., 2021). However, in the study with 21 participants, the authors stated that themes began to be repeated during analysis but did not indicate at what number of interviews this occurred (Bindley et al., 2021). Research similar to this study in topic and methodology tends to have a sample size on the higher end of the 6-12 range from the study by Guest et al. (2006), if not higher in some cases. As noted, most of the studies listed above have 10-12 participants. The lower end of this range would be more feasible for a master's thesis, and Thorne (2016) indicates that available resources are an appropriate factor to consider when deciding on sample size within interpretive description. Based on this similar research and the principles of interpretive description, the initial proposed sample size for this study was determined to be between eight to 10 participants. However, due to a limited response during the recruitment phase of the study, the final number of participants in the study was seven. A study with this number of participants was not intended to be representative of all potential groups but is an initial convenience study to gain preliminary information for this exploratory study and it is anticipated will be sufficient to lay the groundwork for future research.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling (Goodman, 2001) through the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW), as they have the information for all registered social workers in the province who are open to participating in research. The ACSW sent a

recruitment poster (see Appendix A) on behalf of the researcher to those practitioners who have indicated they are open to participating in research, and participants contacted the researcher via email. Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling (Goodman, 2001), with the researcher asking responding participants if they knew of anyone else who may be interested in participating in the study. For studies involving in-depth interviews, convenience sampling is often used as a matter of practicality, and can later transition into snowball sampling (Goodman, 2001).

Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of in-depth, one on one, semi-structured interviews. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant prior to beginning the interview (see Appendix B). Interviews took place via phone or University of Calgary Zoom account, for reasons of convenience and safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked interviewees to arrange for a private location to participate in the interview to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Interviews were audio-recorded via either the Zoom function and saved to my computer or another recording application if conducted by phone. All interviews were transcribed prior to analysis using the automated transcription service via Rev.com. The transcripts were checked for accuracy and any identifying information was removed during transcription. All data was stored in an encrypted file on a computer that also requires a password and was available only to myself and my co-supervisors.

The following interview guide was used:

- Can you share what spirituality means to you?
- Can you describe how you identify yourself in terms of a spiritual or religious person?
- Can you tell me a bit about your practice setting?

- How did you come to start using spirituality within your practice?
    - Was spirituality included in your formal social work education/training?
    - What resources have you found on your own that have informed your use of spirituality in practice? (e.g., seminars, books, personal experience)
    - Has there been a focus on spirituality within your workplaces or with your supervisors/coworkers?
    - Why do you think spirituality is important to include in your practice?
- Can you share the ways in which you use spirituality in your practice?
    - How do you gauge a client's interest/openness in spirituality/religion in the clinical interaction?
    - What specific interventions do you use? (e.g., discussion of spiritual issues, prayer, exercises, referrals)
    - How do you assess how it is working?
    - How do you ensure your practice is ethical with respect to spirituality and that you are not imposing your own beliefs/biases?

Basic demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, educational background, years of experience in the field, and area of practice was also collected from participants during the interview. Interviews were between 31 and 73 minutes in length, with an average of 58 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to the interpretive description method, which is flexible, reflexive, and grounded in the specific discipline of the researcher (Thorne et al., 2004). Data collection and analysis was concurrent and involved constant comparative analysis, consistent with interpretive description, which "will inevitably require that the ongoing

engagement with data be strategically employed to confirm, test, explore, and expand on the conceptualizations that begin to form as soon as you enter the field" (Thorne, 2016, p. 34). Knowledge is inductively generated from the data and developed in the context of that data, so regular reflection of the researcher's preconceptions and ideas is necessary (Thorne, 2016).

Interpretive description allows for creative coding (such as using symbols, colors, or visual tools) depending on what is most useful for the researcher and emphasizes the importance of "intellectual inquiry" throughout the coding process (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 7). The researcher should also "move in and out of the detail [of the data] in an iterative manner" (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 7). It is recommended to use both a reflexive journal, which employs "visual and syntactic reference points as a means of becoming familiar with what your data set contains," and analytic notes or memos which "allow you to ask increasingly complex questions about what it all might mean" (Thorne, 2016, p. 170).

The following process was used for data analysis, consistent with the principles of interpretive description (Thorne, 2016). Data analysis began concurrently with data collection, beginning with a reflexive journal (which was used throughout the process) and reviewing transcripts in detail multiple times to familiarize the researcher with the data; the data was also revisited throughout the analysis. I began coding with only broad-based and generic coding in Microsoft Word, then began sorting coded sections into various Word documents, which allowed me to freely rearrange and test relationships between codes. As analysis advanced, these codes were further refined into emerging categories, then into analytical themes. I attempted to stay grounded in the applied discipline and theoretical scaffolding through the use of the reflexive journal and captured analytic insights through memoing.

Credibility

Rigor in qualitative research aims for trustworthiness and credibility (Goodman, 2001). At the data collection stage, I ensured that the interview questions were neutral (i.e., not leading and without opinion stated or implied), clear (i.e., simple enough for the participant to understand), and open-ended to avoid bias or undue influence from the researcher (Goodman, 2001). I used member checking as a means for enhancing credibility (Varpio et al., 2017). In member checking, participants were provided with the transcript by e-mail and asked to review their transcripts to delete or add information or clarify their intended meaning, in their own words (Goodman, 2001; Varpio et al., 2017). Three participants opted not to receive their transcript following the interview; of the four who received a copy of their transcript, only one participant made clarifications.

With respect to analysis of the data, Varpio et al. (2017) recommend that researchers situate themselves within the data analysis process and describe their own participation in this interpretive process, though researchers frequently present thematic analysis without detailing their interaction with the data that resulted in those themes. In my case, throughout data collection and analysis, I kept an audit trail that documented the reasoning and decisions that were made and how the data evolved into its eventual form (Thorne, 2016). I also met with my co-supervisors during the data analysis process, discussed the ongoing coding, and received feedback.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB). No major ethical concerns from this study were anticipated or arose during the process, because the risks to participants were no greater than those that arise in everyday life. The risk of harm was expected to be minimal because participants were service

providers who were being asked to share their practice in a generalized way, and participation was voluntary. Participation was confidential, and data was stored securely in an encrypted folder on a password protected computer that only I had access to. All data and demographic information were anonymized. In addition, since the sample size was very small (seven) in relation to the pool of potential participants (i.e., social work practitioners in Alberta), the risk of being identified was determined as minimal.

Conclusion

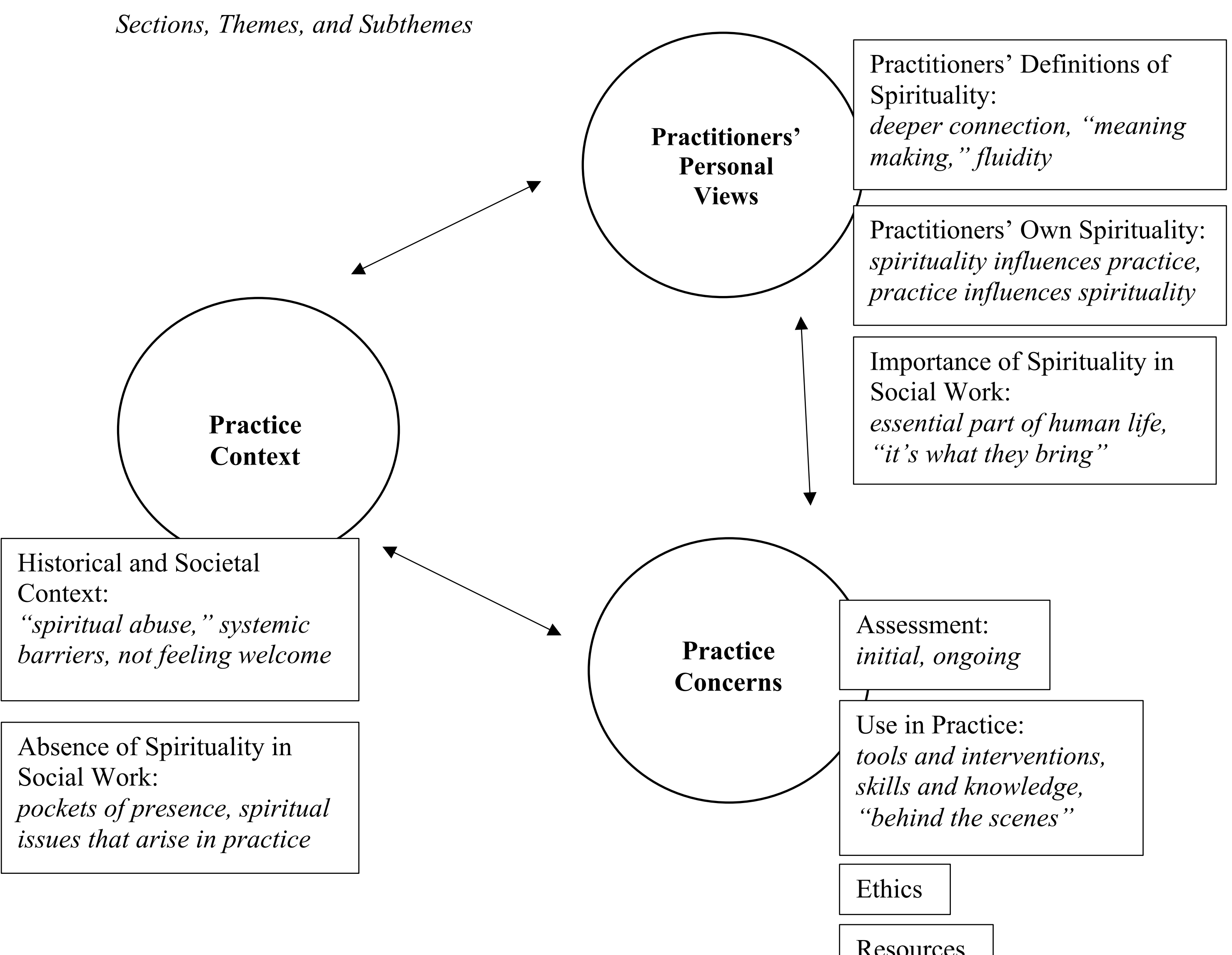
The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of social work practitioners in Alberta who are using spirituality in their practice. The research paradigm used was pragmatism, which I believe is a good fit for social work and helped me to connect research to practice. This research was further grounded in the social work discipline through social work values from the Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005), as well as two foundational social work theories (strengths-based and person in environment) and a psychology theory (transpersonal theory). The methodological approach used in this study, interpretive description, was specifically designed for use in applied disciplines. This chapter also discussed researcher reflexivity and the methods used for sampling, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, issues of credibility and ethics were addressed.

Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of the interviews which explored the experiences and perspectives of social work practitioners in Alberta who are actively incorporating spirituality into their practice. First, demographic information of the participants is provided, and then the findings of the data analysis are presented. The findings are divided into three different sections, as per interpretive description, which recommends using "a 'handful' of major groupings" to "form the organizing structure for your findings write-up" (Thorne, 2016, p. 201). The three sections are practitioners' personal views, practice context, and practice concerns, each of which contain their own themes and subthemes as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Sections, Themes, and Subthemes



The first section, practitioners' personal views, includes three themes: (1) practitioners' definitions of spirituality, which has the subthemes of *deeper connection, "meaning making,"* and *fluidity;* (2) practitioners' own spirituality, which contains the subthemes of *spirituality influences practice* and *practice influences spirituality*; and (3) the importance of spirituality in social work, which is comprised of the subthemes *essential part of human life* and *"it's what they bring."* The second section, practice context, encompasses two themes: (1) historical and societal context, which has the subthemes of *"spiritual abuse," systemic barriers,* and *not feeling welcome;* and (2) absence of spirituality in social work, which includes the subthemes of *pockets of presence* and *spiritual issues that arise in practice*. The final section, practice concerns, includes four themes: (1) assessment, which has the subthemes of *initial* and *ongoing;* (2) use in practice, comprised of the subthemes- *tools and interventions, skills and knowledge,* and *"behind the scenes";* (3) ethics; and (4) resources. These themes and subthemes are discussed with illustrative quotes (labelled by participant number) drawn from the transcripts for "both illumination of commonalities and elaboration of some of the kinds of variations" observed within the data, as per interpretive description (Thorne, 2016, p. 207).

Demographics

There were seven participants in this study: five female and two male. Their ages ranged from 40 to 71, with the average age of 50. Five participants identified their ethnicity as Caucasian, one as Asian, and one as First Nations. Three lived in Calgary, two in Edmonton, one in Lethbridge, and one in rural Northwest Alberta. Six of the participants had achieved an MSW degree as their highest level of social work education, the remaining participant had a BSW degree. Their years of experience in the field ranged from 11 to 50, with an average of 23. With

respect to type of practice, five participants were practicing in clinical settings, either in private practice, faith-based organizations, or through a health centre, and the other two were practicing in a hospital or health centre. One participant was also teaching social work classes. In terms of their own spiritual identity, four identified as spiritual but not religious, two identified as practicing Christians, and one practiced traditional Indigenous spirituality.

Findings

Study findings are presented in the three sections: practitioners' personal views, practice context, and practice concerns, each containing their own themes and subthemes. The first section is practitioners' personal views.

Practitioners' Personal Views

This section presents the participants' personal views and approaches to spirituality. The first theme, practitioners' definitions of spirituality, contains the subthemes *deeper connection, "meaning making,"* and *fluidity.* The second theme, practitioners' own spirituality, is comprised of subthemes *spirituality influences practice* and *practice influences spirituality.* The final theme, importance of spirituality in social work, contains subthemes *essential part of human life* and *"it's what they bring."*

Practitioners' Definitions of Spirituality. Participants offered various definitions of spirituality, typically comprised of three key components: *deeper connection*, a practice of *"meaning making,"* and *fluidity*.

In terms of *connection*, participants primarily noted how spirituality involves an element of deep connection, to oneself and/or to the world around them. One participant defined spirituality as "any practice or belief that helps somebody get in touch more with their soul or beyond emotion" [P2], and another explained it as a "deep feeling of being connected to oneself

and to everything around me and respecting everything around me" [P5]. Another participant expressed spirituality as "what people find a comfort in and some of that hope or feeling that there's a greater connection" [P3]. Others emphasized a feeling of connection with themselves by defining spirituality as "coming home to yourself" [P6], "trusting your own self" [P6], and "listening to… my soul, spirit, essence, being one with universe" [P7].

Two participants also described spirituality as a process of "*meaning making"* [P6], as in "looking at yourself from a philosophical perspective, within a larger context of just how energy affects us" [P6]. Another elaborated that spirituality was a way that people "make meaning from their lives… understanding life and death, and life after death, and all those kinds of big existential questions that we're faced with" [P4].

Some participants noted an element of *fluidity* in spirituality, which they commented is often not concretely defined or fixed. Multiple participants noted how many people are spiritually "evolving and growing" [P1] throughout their lives, either gradually over time or through a sudden change in circumstances with one participant stating, "different life experiences challenge people to try to see where they fit in relation to community or in relation to a fellow human being" [P3]. In a similar way, one participant described spirituality as a "continuum" [P4], rather than comprised of distinct categories. The fluidity of spirituality was evidenced in the stories participants told of their own spiritual journey and growth.

Practitioners' Own Spirituality. All the participants in the study discussed the connection between their own spirituality and their practice as social workers, describing it as having a reciprocal influence. In terms of *spirituality influencing practice,* nearly all participants identified that their own spiritual beliefs influenced their practice in some way. One participant commented that his spirituality "naturally flows" into his work because it is integral to who he is

and continually compels him to focus on "personal growth [and] character building" [P2]. Some articulated being motivated to enter the profession because of their own spiritual beliefs and values, like one participant who saw social work as a "way to live out [his] spiritual practices" since social workers often serve the "oppressed or marginalized" [P2].

Multiple participants had identified a life-changing or crisis event, such as an illness diagnosis or an unexpected change in life plans, that spurred their own spiritual development. In turn, they shared that this spiritual exploration and growth translated into their practice. One participant commented that she felt it was her "sole purpose" to help others through life-altering experiences like the one she experienced, and to help others "be in touch with their soul, spirit, essence, wise self" [P7]. Some participants began to implement spiritual practices that had been helpful for them personally into their work:

> Reiki was something that was very helpful for my body. So I became a Reiki master. Everything that I encounter and experience that helped my own personal healing and I find value in I've learned and trained in it and deliver it to clients, should they choose to experience it. [P7]

Practice also influenced participants' spirituality; multiple participants spoke about how experiences in their work either sparked or deepened their interest in spirituality. Spirituality came up in their work with clients often and in different ways, which, in turn, made them more aware of and curious about spirituality in their own lives. Some described themselves as initially not very spiritual but became more so over the course of their social work career, in part because of their work:

> I'd say it was probably through my work because my work was so – like such a big part of my life. And just the variety of experiences that I had that I would say it was more

> work-related that would have sparked... And then experiences I was having and how spirituality maybe made sense to me. [P3]

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

> And I would say that's probably where my career transected a little bit with spirituality too was cause when I started doing grief and loss with the loss of children, I didn't really have a spirituality at that point. And then I started hearing the same stories over and over and over and over and over and over again. [P6]

In a related way, one participant stated he felt he had become more open-minded through his work by being exposed to spiritual ideas and beliefs different from his own.

Importance of Spirituality in Social Work. When asked about why they believe spirituality is an important component of social work practice, respondents articulated that spirituality is an *essential part of human life*, and *"it's what they bring."*

According to participants' responses, spirituality is important in social work because it is an *essential part of life and human existence*. Spirituality is an essential "aspect of self" [P6], and a purely secular approach, according to participants, is an "incomplete view" [P1]. For many people, spirituality is "very important and very central to who they are" [P1] or "like drinking water" [P4]. One participant posited that science cannot answer all questions: "There's always going to be the unknown and the mysterious and the sublime and the beautiful and the creative and those, to my way of thinking, come from the divine" [P1].

A similar sentiment was expressed by one participant, stating that "the spiritual questions I think are really important because they assist us when… many other things don't make sense" [P4]; another commented that spirituality is "like working from the inside out" [P7], in that solutions to the problems people face are typically found within and closely linked with

spirituality. This participant further noted that spirituality in social work is largely considered a taboo subject and its connections to practice are not recognized. Another participant stated that it is important for social workers to be “culturally competent and spiritually competent” [P6]. One respondent specifically noted the use of spirituality in practice with Indigenous people was critical because “Indigenous people need to feel good and honoured” [P5].

Some participants also noted that spirituality is important in social work practice because *“it’s what they bring”* and helps connect clients with their past as well as their future. As one participant explains:

> People have to have a buy-in and I think spirituality fits in a couple of ways. One, it’s what they bring. I mean, we can’t assume that people have had no life, that they’re just, we’re just opening up a book and we’re on page one. No, they’ve had tons of experience. They’ve survived lots of challenging things before… but you have to remember where people’s journeys have been and how people are being resilient. And they’ve made it this far. Not because a social worker did a bunch of stuff for them… So, I think with spirituality, if that’s what a grounding is for a person, then we need to help whatever the new piece is building onto that. And if spirituality is also talking about future, about best life or about how long you live or where your soul goes… then that’s the buy-in. [P3]

All participants discussed bringing their own spirituality into their work in some way and as one identified, spirituality “can inform or transform or direct any social worker’s own personal practice framework” [P2]. The ways in which spirituality was brought into practice was not always explicit or direct, which will be discussed further later in this chapter.

Practice Context

In this section, participants describe the societal and professional contexts that they work within, and some of the implications for their practice. The section contains two themes: (1) historical and societal context, with subthemes of *"spiritual abuse," systemic barriers,* and *not feeling welcome;* and (2) absence of spirituality in social work, with subthemes of *pockets of presence* and *spiritual issues that arise in practice*.

Historical and Societal Context. Many participants spoke about the societal context in which they practice, especially with respect to historical *"spiritual abuse"* and oppression, and the *systemic barriers* or *unwelcoming environment* that some groups still face as a result. Multiple participants discussed how these factors affect their clients as well as themselves as practitioners.

Several participants expressed awareness about the particular history of the society they practice in and the *"spiritual abuse"* that has occurred. One noted how prevalent Judeo-Christian values and ideas are in Canada; even if we are not always aware of it, "we're surrounded, we're swimming in it" [P6]. A participant described the religious and "spiritual abuse, abuse in the name of God, taking advantage of people" [P1] that has occurred in the name of Christianity adding, "we know that the Bible has been horribly misused and really bad things have happened over the centuries" [P1]. Multiple participants discussed residential schools and the impacts on the Indigenous population in Canada. For example, one participant commented how some Indigenous people have been afraid to pass on cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices: "When I got older, I was like, now I know why [my grandmother] never wanted to teach me the language and fear that I might get bullied or I might get… repercussions of that." [P5] The participant who teaches social work classes emphasized the importance of discussing religious persecution with students:

> And if we look at like colonialization, again, we can't not talk about spirituality when it comes to the Indigenous people of this country, because it's been forced upon them and taken away from them. And our system is based on that, right. The persecution is religious based. And so, we have to look at how does that form the child welfare system?... So, we talk about it within the context of, you know, what is even social work's role within the religious context.

A participant also noted how many Indigenous people have been impacted by the recent discoveries of unmarked graves at many residential schools in Canada:

> I think social workers need to realize working with Indigenous people now that a lot of Indigenous people that I have been seeing, coming in, are stepping away from the Catholic church. Like they're just so profounded by what they're hearing, what experiences have really happened. And so, a lot of them are conflicted still, right. They are kind of like on both worlds. [P5]

This Indigenous participant described being personally affected by residential schools and by the recent discoveries of the unmarked graves, stating that the latter had also resulted in her having recently "stepped away from the Catholic church" [P5].

Another issue raised by one participant was the *systemic barriers* that exist for many Indigenous people trying to access services. For example, the Indigenous participant had to turn away many Indigenous clients because she was unable to direct bill Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada due to her practice not yet meeting their requirements to be considered clinical. This participant further suggested that many "Indigenous people do want to see an Indigenous social worker who has also walked their path of intergenerational trauma" [P5].

Two participants also expressed issues with clients and practitioners *not feeling welcome* in social work spaces. One noted that Indigenous people do not always feel welcomed in Western spaces where they might be receiving services, such as if smudging is not allowed: “unfortunately, you can't smudge [in] a lot of buildings. That's a barrier” [P5]. This Indigenous participant suggested that agencies and organizations could make themselves more welcoming to Indigenous people – both clients and practitioners – by putting up Indigenous artwork, “talking about Indigenous issues or how to help,” including “a blurb in the newsletter,” or “building Indigenous ways of knowing into their policies” [P5]. The participant advised starting small and “building capacity” [P5] from that. The participant identified not always feeling welcome or comfortable as an Indigenous practitioner:

> But it still doesn’t have that welcoming aspect of like, why can’t I smudge in session? Why do I have to remove myself from the Westernized office to go outside and do it? … Why can’t we as Indigenous people stay here and smudge? So there’s like those complexities that I internally battle with as a practitioner doing spirituality. [P5]

This participant further shared that she encountered resistance as an Indigenous social worker in many places that she had worked.

Another participant who identified as spiritual but not religious also shared not always feeling comfortable bringing spirituality into her practice. She commented that she felt her approach to spirituality was not as accepted in social work as Christianity and was concerned about potential professional ramifications that she did not think a Christian social worker would face:

> I want to be able to share who I am because who we are in counselling is so much of our tool, knowing it’s not about us, but we still bring ourselves. And so, I think we don’t do a

good job of being incredibly inclusive, given that we are a predominantly Christian country. [P6]

Absence of Spirituality in Social Work. With respect to their professional context, all participants noted to some degree that spirituality is widely unacknowledged and unaddressed within the profession of social work. Most stated that spirituality was not taught in their social work education or training, and if it was, it was extremely limited or only marginally included. Participants' described schools and various workplaces as "unsupportive" or even "hostile" [P1] towards spirituality. Others commented that spirituality was tolerated, but not seen as a priority, as one participant stated that their workplace viewed spirituality as "nice on the side" [P2].

The marginal space spirituality occupied in the social work curriculum was noted by participants as a topic that was not really discussed and not "encouraged openly" [P7]. Moreover, when spirituality inevitably comes up in practice, it is "pushed aside," resulting in a general attitude of "guardedness" among practitioners desiring to use spirituality [P7]. One participant suggested that one reason for this reticence is because social work "want[s] to play on par with psychology" and "be seen as legitimate as psychologists" [P6], with another positing that social work is a secular discipline that views spirituality as "irrelevant, anachronistic, and unscientific" [P1].

Despite an overall lack of spirituality within social work education and practice, participants noted some *pockets of presence* within the profession. In particular, respondents described certain settings or areas of practice in which spirituality was welcomed and normalized. One example was Alcoholics Anonymous, which has a "spiritual component" and references a "higher power" [P3]. Another was palliative care, in which practitioners are working with individuals who are dying and therefore facing many spiritual and existential questions, or

planning ceremonies or rituals for their passing, so spirituality is somewhat of a "forced conversation" [P3]. One participant described working in a faith-based organization in which spirituality was prominent, though he noted that he was the only social worker employed at this organization.

One participant described being on a particular unit when she worked in child welfare, in which spirituality was normalized due to the openness and interest of that particular group of people: "it was kind of contagious to all of us in that unit because we were all open to it and we saw the benefit of it" [P3]. This participant advanced that the acceptance of spirituality on this unit, may have been influenced by the Indigenous practitioner of the unit who continually brought the lens of her Indigenous spirituality into her work. The participant acknowledged that this was not a standard practice within child welfare: "…she would always have something that would be connecting it back to what that might have meant for her in terms of Aboriginal spirituality… That wasn't part of the provincial child welfare assessment" [P3].

Another area in which spirituality was prominent was in the field of grief and loss. A number of participants working in this area described spirituality as integral to their work because grief and loss inevitably bring up questions of identity, meaning, worldview, purpose, and connections with others and/or a higher power, regardless of how someone identifies spiritually. As one participant explains: "I think it is an aspect of grief and loss counselling that is touched on whether or not someone believes that they have a strong sense of spirituality or not" [P4]. Another participant expressed a similar sentiment about how integral spirituality is to grief work:

> And so it started to become this thing where it's like this isn't an extraordinary experience. People tell the same themes about dreams, the same themes of signs, the

> same things that happen to them over and over again. And so, I think in the grief work so much of what we talk about is how do you strengthen a spiritual relationship, even if you're atheist, how do you, how do you continue to have a relationship with this person who has passed, when they're not physically here to give you the feedback in the same way that they would in physical form? [P6]

Although there is a lack of formal acknowledgment and discussion around this topic in social work, participants identified that *spiritual issues frequently arise in their work* with clients. Once again, spiritual issues surrounding grief, loss, death, dying, and illness or disability adjustment were prevalent in participants' experiences as several worked in this area. Often these were in the form of spiritual or existential questions or struggles, including questioning why this is happening, searching for meaning, adjusting their relationship to a loved one who has passed, feeling anger at God, or having a crisis of faith. According to multiple participants, mystical experiences are also extremely common among clients experiencing grief and loss, in which the person experiences a connection or presence of someone who has passed:

> I think we're very often allowed to say we've had dreams, but we're not necessarily allowed to say that like our cell phone keeps playing the same music over and over again, even though we're nowhere near it, or like all of the kind of mystical healing experiences that happen within grief. [P6]

Other participants encountered clients with spiritual or existential dilemmas or crises outside of the areas of grief, loss, and dying as well:

> … somebody who was Indigenous, who in our sessions, they would be conflicted because as young children, they may have been baptized in a Catholic church. They may have then also been part of the Mormon church. And they now felt that they were part of

> like whatever their culture and spirituality was. And more than once, there were folks that were really conflicted about where their soul was. Where was their soul going to go? [P3]

Another participant who worked at a faith-based organization stated that sometimes clients from a different faith or belief system would specifically seek out this agency because they were not comfortable bringing an issue to their own faith community:

> And a lot of times folks have disconnected from their faith communities because they've had a bad experience… folks sometimes will choose to see us at [the agency] rather than talking to their own minister or pastor because of the relationship that they have with that pastor or minister or spiritual leader, you know, rabbi, imam, et cetera, because that religious leader is leading a community and the client is a member of that community. So, the whole confidentiality thing becomes a fraught issue. Whereas if you come to an agency like ours, a professional agency, you will have rock solid guarantee of confidentiality. [P1]

One participant described how clients may understand mental health issues through their own cultural or spiritual lens:

> Because if you look at Indigenous people or Hindu people, some Buddhist people, they will say, you will still hear things about mental health being an energy or an entity or something attached to them. Whether we believe that or not. I think we do them a disservice if we don't explore where that belief comes from and then educate on what else might be possible. But if they believe their schizophrenia is possession or their family believes the schizophrenia is possession, that might, you know, of course it's schizophrenia, but we need to understand culturally and spiritually, where does the idea that it's possession come from without minimizing? Like you can't just say, God, it's not

> possession. Like you need to be able to explore where that comes from. And then, so that we have a launching point of relationships and then we can educate people on what it is… I would ask what their belief is about that. And you will have clients sort of say like, well, what if it's possession? Well, then I might spend half an hour, tell me about that then. Before I get to sort of disproving them as to why it's not possession. [P6]

One participant noted that she had encountered issues or dilemmas as a practitioner. She shared concerns she sometimes had about Indigenous children being placed in religious homes while she was working in child welfare:

> My role was to advocate and make sure that the children, they were there to be protected, to be safe and not to be further damaged… I think there was a difference I could notice when there was good intentions and when there were people that were just had a real agenda, that they were going to save these children… I guess maybe that's the parallel with residential school. Maybe that's why it bothered me so much that it's, there was a real agenda and that shouldn't be the reason that you're fostering. [P3]

Some cited spirituality as a potential strength for clients, but also a potential area for struggle: "It's kind of like looking at their spirituality, can it be a resource for them? And for some people it can be, in other people it's a source of pain" [P4]. Some participants also noted that there are clients who are not interested in spirituality at all, which they then respect as a practitioner.

Practice Concerns

With respect to the practice concerns section, participants shared the specific ways in which they use spirituality in their practice, how they ensure their practice is ethical, and what resources they have found helpful with respect to spirituality. The category has four themes: (1)

assessment, with subthemes of *initial* and *ongoing;* (2) use in practice, with subthemes of *tools and interventions, skills and knowledge,* and *"behind the scenes"*; (3) ethics; and (4) resources.

Assessment. Participants were asked how they assessed a client's *initial* interest and openness to having spirituality included in the work, as well as how they assess spirituality and the efficacy of spiritually based interventions on an *ongoing* basis. Participants identified a variety of approaches to assessing spirituality in the *initial* stages when they first began working with a client. Some participants had more formal or direct ways of assessing spirituality. One participant's faith-based organization included spiritual questions in their intake form:

> …one of the sections asks about your — I think it uses the term spirituality rather than religion, and people are invited to say what role spirituality plays in their life and are they part of a faith community, and do they want religious or spiritual ideas raised by the counsellor in the counselling… The last question is a very specific one. "Do you want the counsellor to pray with you? Yes or no?" Well, that's a pretty clear indication; or even the question above that: "do you want spirituality to be a subject for consideration in your counselling? Yes or no?" [P1]

Other participants used tools such as ecomaps and genograms, with the view that spirituality would come up in a more informal way within the exploration of a client's connections and relationships. One participant asked clients to place themselves on a continuum of spirituality. Another used the Medicine Wheel to assess how clients are doing physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Another participant used this same approach, but through a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework, rather than the Medicine Wheel. Some participants did not initiate conversations about spirituality but instead waited for the client to bring it up, either

directly or through "clues" which they would then "get curious" [P7] about and ask further questions.

To assess spirituality or the efficacy of spiritual interventions on a more *ongoing* basis, most participants employed an informal approach, often in the form of ongoing conversations with clients. As one respondent elaborated: "I'm just checking in and making sure we're having conversations that are meaningful, that we're moving in the right direction together… It sort of flows in and out, you know, it's this creative process in a way" [P4].

One participant noted she is not particularly tied to specific outcomes in relation to her spiritual practice:

> …whatever role I'm supposed to be in, I'm supposed to be in. I'm not hooked on the outcome. It's what people take from this experiences that they may value and feel in the moment… whether that's one session or 20 sessions, there's no particular end game for me. [P7]

One participant mentioned using the energy scale and window of tolerance, based on Dan Siegel's (1999) work. Clients use numbers on a scale from 0-10 to attune to their nervous system and rate their feelings of arousal. Another participant stated that she would like to implement more formal measurement tools in her work but had only recently begun her private practice.

Use of Spirituality in Practice. When asked about the specific ways that participants use spirituality in their practice, their responses fell into three sub-themes: *tools and interventions, skills and knowledge,* and *"behind the scenes."*

Participants shared a wide variety of specific *tools and interventions* that they use in their work with clients. The primary technique described by all participants was simply discussing spiritual issues with clients. However, participants also detailed other *interventions or tools* that

they use in their practice. For example, in their discussions with clients, some participants further the conversation by suggesting spiritual concepts or ideas to clients, drawing on a variety of cultures. One participant gave the example of asking a client about a concept within Blackfoot culture around multiple "exit points" in the course of our lives where "our soul could decide to go" or not [P6]. The participant stressed that they suggest various concepts with an attitude of curiosity and not in a prescriptive way. Some participants mentioned using self-disclosure about their own spirituality, but only in situations where it seems "appropriate" [P2] or "clinically relevant" [P4]. Two participants stated that they open the conversation by discussing what spiritual materials clients are reading; one mentioned that she had a specific book list for clients while the other said he chose not to recommend specific readings.

Many participants mentioned referring clients to others in spiritual matters, either to a colleague with theological training, to the client's own spiritual leader or community, or to on-site spiritual services such as a chaplain who works at the hospital. Those who worked at hospitals or health centres mentioned on-site spiritual services such as a multi-faith, multipurpose chapel; designated smudging rooms; an Indigenous and/or multicultural liaison; facilitating visits from clients' own spiritual leaders; and a chaplain who offers a wide variety of spiritual services, both in individual and group settings. However, participants mentioned some of these services were lost due to budget cuts or restricted due to COVID-19. Outside of health care settings, no participants mentioned having formal relationships with spiritual leaders. One participant with a newly established private practice hoped to form connections with Elders and access to sweat lodges.

Many participants described exploring ceremonies and rituals with clients, particularly in the area of grief and loss. Ceremonies or rituals were described as ranging from large or small;

some of the examples cited were lighting a candle in memory of a loved one or having a group of people fill a box with memories or mementos in remembrance of a loved one on a special occasion. Exploring ceremony and ritual was presented by participants as an open, collaborative endeavour based on "what's meaningful for [the client] and what's comfortable" [P4], and the purpose was to use it "as a mark to be able to move forward" [P3].

Some participants talked about praying with clients; two participants specifically stating that they had engaged in prayer with clients, though infrequently. Another commented that she did not think it would be appropriate for her to pray with clients because she does not work in a faith-based organization, as she explained: "I don't know, it just feels like it just would be wrong because we serve people of all faiths and cultures and all beliefs… I don't know, but I have never even considered doing that" [P4].

One participant shared that she regularly smudges [Indigenous spiritual/ceremonial practice] with clients. Multiple clients reported engaging in spiritual modalities such as chakras, hypnosis, yoga, mindfulness, meditation, and a holistic focus that includes physical aspects such as discussions around nutrition, sleep, the nervous system, etc. Some respondents had certifications in these practices that they blended with their social work practice. Reiki, "a Japanese mindfulness meditation energy technique where you… get attuned to a certain energy that allows you to sort of send healing out of your hands" was also used by some participants in their practice if clients were interested, primarily as a "relaxation technique" [P6]. One participant described using tarot cards as a tool but allowing clients to interpret the card rather than providing an interpretation as the practitioner.

Participants also described *skills and knowledge* they believed were crucial for addressing spirituality in practice. Specifically, giving clients "permission" [P1] to raise spirituality if they

wished was a noted skill in this practice. This was typically done in implicit rather than explicit ways. For many in private practice, it meant being clear about who they are, what their approach is, and what they offer, so that clients are aware that spiritual discussion and/or interventions are an option even before they come to a session:

> I often do it as my information package. So, I'll say this is who I am. This is a little bit of my journey and what I've found helpful in my own journey. These are the therapeutic approaches that I take. And then I sort of leave it up to them. [P6]

Some participants also described listening for cues that a client might be alluding to a spiritual issue, even if they do not state it directly. These cues might be the type of language or concepts that they are using. Upon hearing these cues, participants would then "invite" [P1] the client to consider the spiritual dimension, if appropriate:

> There are a lot of things that we don't know; that we don't have control over. It doesn't matter how many years of therapy we have. We're never going to nail down everything. There's mystery and there are different ways to accommodate or accept or benefit or be healed by what mystery is. And so if I feel people can use that sort of direction, I will point it out. [P1]

Some participants thought it was highly important for practitioners to have a basic knowledge of a variety of belief systems (including religious, political, cultural, and philosophical), some thought it was helpful but not necessary, and one participant stated she instead preferred to come from a place of "not knowing" [P7] and have the client define their own experience. Some participants stated that they learn from their clients, especially because "how people interpret their faith and… what it means for them is always very unique" [P4]. Some participants noted how important it is to have an attitude of curiosity and openness. One

participant discussed an instance where not knowing enough about a different religion caused an issue within his practice, but he was able to learn from his clients:

> I'm thinking of a couple that came in, a Jewish couple. They were seniors, they were retired people in their seventies, and they were very clear that they came to [agency] because it wasn't Jewish… So, this couple said, "We can't go to Jewish Family Services. We wouldn't feel safe there. So, we come to a Christian agency because we feel confident that confidentiality will be respected." I made a mistake on that case. Because Christianity evolved from Judaism a lot of Christian theology is based on ideas of sin and the need for forgiveness that comes from the Old Testament. I think I made the mistake of not knowing enough about the differences in Judaism and their points of view. I was probably taking too much of a Christian interpretation of where this couple was in their dilemma. I appreciate that they told me, "Wait a minute, you're missing the point. Here in Judaism, we see it this way and it sounds like you're coming from your Christian background on this." And I said, "Yeah, you're probably right. Thank you for pointing that out". [P1]

Multiple participants stated the importance of "naming" [P6] the power dynamic present, as a practitioner working with a client, but also in terms of other positions of privilege (such as racial or gendered) that a practitioner might hold. Naming this power dynamic and developing a trusting, respectful relationship was considered essential in mitigating it.

Although mentioned by a small minority of respondents, another way that spirituality was present in participants' work was through the spiritual work or practices they were doing *"behind the scenes"* [P2], which they suggested had a positive impact on their work with clients.

The *behind the scenes* practices included spiritual practices, personal development, and self-care that assisted practitioners or developed their own practice framework:

> I think my spiritual practice influences not only the way I approach my work and specifically the patients… when I try to love the patients and try to enact and live out my faith, like not just all this knowledge… and try to transform it to my heart if you will, by living what I preach. I think the spirituality part comes in as well, where the patient doesn't have to have a clue. Like that I care, or I've been praying and they're not just an Alberta health care number to me. [P2]

This participant also reported being part of a multidisciplinary staff prayer group, in which staff members would pray for clients, colleagues, or their own personal lives. Though it was an open group for people of any belief system, all group members were Christian. This participant acknowledged he would also sometimes pray for clients outside of the group practice.

This *behind the scenes* practice was primarily expressed only by one participant, although another participant reported doing Reiki on herself to "centre" [P6] herself before starting a session with a client. It is possible that other participants had their own *behind the scenes* practices, but participants were not specifically asked about this.

Ethics. Participants were asked how they ensured the spiritual aspects of their practice were ethical. The most prevalent response from participants was respecting the client's own beliefs. This included not pushing one view or the practitioner's own views, not assuming what someone's beliefs are, "owning" [P6] your mistakes as a practitioner, asking open-ended questions, creating an open dialogue, listening to, and honouring clients' stories, and using a collaborative approach. It also meant the practitioner must be "very aware of [their] own belief systems and biases" [P4] and must build a "foundation of rapport" and "trust" with clients [P5].

One participant specifically mentioned the importance of respecting the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics.

Multiple participants discussed the need for practitioners to use self-reflection and have an awareness of their own beliefs and biases, so that they are not unduly influencing their practice in this area. Self-reflection might include questioning your motivation for taking a conversation in a certain direction, questioning if your approach would have been the same for any other client, or reflecting on any personal reactions you might have, as one participant articulates:

> Because I do recognize it, as much as I'm going 'Well, I follow the client,' I'm also very aware that part of our role is we do manipulate conversations, right? We try to circle things back to what we may have picked up that the person doesn't have awareness that it was important to them. So we do circle back and we do bring something up again… I guess for me, ethical is making sure that I would do the same for other people, that I don't curb my service to be something different. Or that I don't deny a person the same opportunity. [P3]

One participant stated that supervision was important for ensuring her practice was ethical, and another said that she consults with colleagues and others including the ACSW, lawyers, and insurance providers. The latter participant was particularly concerned about potential repercussions for using Reiki in her practice:

> And so oftentimes I do feel a little bit torn and I don't know if it's in private practice because I'm a little bit more exposed because it's my own business, but in a, in a perfect world, I would love to do like Reiki and counselling together and not feel like that was shameful or wrong. [P6]

Those participants who used Reiki in their social work practice stated that they used separate consent forms for those who chose to receive it, and ensured that clients were very informed about Reiki before consenting to it. One participant noted that informed consent to spiritual practices is an ongoing process:

> …how I approach it is I have many ideas about how we could possibly work together, what I have to offer you, as you know, this is what I offer. You've read my website, or you've read my policy and procedures. You may have some questions about my interventions. Here's the time to do that. If you're curious down the road, there's no silly questions… I don't know your body or mind, but here's some ideas and we're always in choice along the way. So, I think it's important to have always a constant dialogue, a constant check-in, but always having them refer back to information. [P7]

According to one participant, the social work profession needs to be more open to conversations on spirituality to ensure ethical practice in the realm of spirituality, as she explained:

> We all have our own individual shame and fear about asking a question. And when we can't ask a question, then we can't be ethical… I would say that most people I've ever talked about this say that they just, they constantly are worried they're doing something they shouldn't be doing. [P6]

Resources. Participants were also asked what resources had been most helpful in informing their use of spirituality in practice. Some mentioned specific scholars or thinkers that they found particularly helpful in informing the spiritual aspect of their practice, including Dr. Scott Peck, Eckhart Tolle, Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, Brene Brown, Michael Singer, and Louis LaGrand's book *Messages & Miracles: Extraordinary Experiences of the Bereaved.* Others,

particularly those who worked in the area of grief and loss, cited the Association for Death Education and Counselling as a useful resource.

Most participants, however, stated that their greatest resources in this area “are other people” [P3], and that they have learned from colleagues, clients, mentors, Elders, or other spiritual teachers. One participant stated that she seeks teachers who “keep [her] inquiring about [her]self” [P7]. Another recognized that mentorship is lacking in social work more generally but commented that mentorship had been hugely influential to their own practice. Some participants reported that their life experiences in general had influenced their work, more than any specific source, as one respondent shared: “I couldn't give you like a specific website or a book, but to me it's like the accumulation of the life experiences and everything I've been through that lead up to this point” [P2].

Conclusion

The findings from the data analysis were divided into three sections. The first was practitioners’ views on spirituality, which outlined how participants defined spirituality. It also presented how the participants’ own spirituality both influences and is influenced by their practice, and why they believe spirituality is essential to social work.

The second section, practice context, explored participants’ views on the history of the society they practice in, especially pertaining to spiritual abuses and ongoing systemic barriers. Participants also noted the absence of spirituality in social work, although it arose that there are certain areas of practice in which spirituality is present. This section also contained a description of some of the spiritual issues that participants have encountered in their practice.

The final section, practice concerns, described how participants assess spirituality with clients both initially and on an ongoing basis. It also elaborated on the specific ways that

practitioners incorporated spirituality in their practice, including tools and interventions, skills and knowledge, and behind the scenes practice. This section concluded with an exploration of how participants ensure the spiritual aspect of their practice is ethical, and what resources have been most helpful in informing this area of their practice. The next chapter will discuss the meaning and implications of these findings.

Chapter 5. Discussion

While the previous chapter outlining the findings pertained more to the descriptive aspects of this study, this chapter is focused on the interpretive aspects (Thorne, 2016). However, interpretive description acknowledges that the researcher has been engaged in some level of interpretation throughout the entire process. This chapter engages in that interpretation more intentionally and more deeply to make claims about what the findings of the study mean within the social work context and existing literature.

As stated previously, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of social work practitioners in Alberta who are actively incorporating spirituality into their practice. The research questions were: How are social work practitioners incorporating spirituality into their direct practice with service users? and What informs their use of spirituality in their practice and supports their competence in this area? This chapter will respond to these questions by revisiting the findings of the previous chapter, reflecting on existing literature that was discussed in the literature review chapter and drawing conclusions from the study. This will be followed by providing specific implications for social work policy, education, and practice, as well as possible areas for future research, study limitations, and next steps.

Practitioners' Personal Views

Participants were asked how they define spirituality. Some participants conceptualize spirituality as a process of "meaning making," which Canda et al. (2020) articulate as more encompassing as "the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and well-being" (p. 96). Participants also stated that spirituality involves a deeper connection to yourself and the world around you, which is conveyed by Canda et al. (2020) as being "*in relationship* with oneself, other people, other beings, the universe, and ultimate reality however understood" (p. 96).

Definitions provided by practitioners shared two of the four elements from the definition by Canda et al. (2020) that I discussed in the literature review chapter and used for this study. Two further elements included by Canda et al. (2020) which participants did not mention in the interviews were a sense of transcendence and an orientation around significant priorities. It is curious that participants did not mention these two elements and may be a topic worthy of further inquiry. It is also possible additional interviews may have uncovered these aspects of spirituality. Participants' definitions of spirituality were similar and broad enough to be applicable to a variety of different belief systems.

Participants' own spirituality was described as highly significant to them; it guided and informed their practice, and, in some cases, provided motivation for the work in which they were engaged. This aligns with existing literature that suggests spirituality is important to many social work practitioners (Belcher & Sarmiento, 2016; Larsen, 2011), with some being motivated by their spiritual beliefs to enter the field (Hohn et al., 2017; Mulder, 2015). In turn, the practice experiences of participants in this study also influenced their spirituality. Their individual stories outlining mutual influences however, varied, with participants taking multiple pathways to deepen spiritual engagement: some were motivated in part to enter the field due to their spiritual beliefs, and some had personal and/or professional experiences during their careers that deepened or changed their spirituality. This occurred at different points in their lives and careers, and participants had a variety of spiritual backgrounds.

Responses about why spirituality is important within social work were also largely similar, focusing on spirituality as an essential part of human existence and that many clients and practitioners inevitably bring their spirituality into the work. The implication is that neglecting to address spirituality within social work is a disservice to both clients and practitioners. This is

consistent with a wide body of literature indicating that spirituality may be valuable to many populations with whom social workers work, as well as to practitioners themselves (Crisp, 2020).

Practice Context

A number of participants spoke about how historical and societal context influences spirituality, especially with respect to systemic oppression. The sole Indigenous participant gave the most detail about Indigenous peoples' experiences regarding spirituality, stating that social work spaces often feel unwelcoming to both Indigenous clients and social workers. Indigenous peoples' experiences are of particular importance due to Canada's history of oppression towards Indigenous peoples, and social work's complicity and participation in that oppression (Lavallee & Poole, 2010). Specific attention must be paid to Indigenous peoples' experiences and priorities within social work, including with respect to spirituality. Spirituality is central to an Indigenous worldview and understanding of health and well-being (Baskin, 2016; Duran & Firehammer, 2016; Lavallee & Poole, 2010). Therefore, as I posited previously in this thesis, addressing spirituality in social work is a social justice issue, which is a core value of the profession according to the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics.

However, while multiple participants discussed the historical oppression that certain groups have experienced, including some of the spiritual dimensions of this oppression, it was not clear how this awareness would influence participants' practice with these oppressed groups beyond identifying and naming any power dynamics present. There appeared to be a disconnect between an awareness of the oppression of certain groups and the ways in which the non-Indigenous participants might act on this in practice, both in direct work with clients and at a more macro level. Verniest (2006) states that social work practitioners' skills "must be tailored to appropriately address the needs representing the diversity of clientele" (Culturally Competent

Social Work With Aboriginal Peoples section, para. 1). According to Verniest (2006), to be culturally competent social workers must tailor their interventions to the client's cultural identity. None of the participants talked about tailoring their interventions to a client's identity, though all reported being respectful of clients' beliefs and responsive to their comfort levels. There are tools available such as Eguchi et al.'s (2016) toolkit to assist social workers in decolonizing their practice, which includes some specific ways to do so with Indigenous clients. Lavallee (2010) warns of the dangers of appropriating Indigenous cultural practices within social work practice, and instead advocates for collaboration with Elders and other traditional healers who can engage in such practices with clients. Collaborating with Indigenous healers or spiritual leaders of other cultural or religious groups could prevent appropriation of sacred cultural and spiritual practices as well as solve the issue of social work practitioners trying to learn about a vast array of spiritual, religious, and cultural beliefs. However, this type of collaboration was something participants had only minimally participated in, and mainly within a hospital or health care setting. Additionally, this could potentially raise other issues. For example, one participant reported having clients seek services at his organization specifically because they were not comfortable bringing a spiritual issue to their own faith leader or community.

Scholars also state the need for reconciliatory action and advocacy at the workplace and community level (Eguchi et al., 2016; Verniest, 2006). The sole participant to speak about change at a structural level within social work was the only Indigenous participant. She suggested some ways to make social work spaces more welcoming to Indigenous clients and social workers, including smudging, Indigenous artwork, discussing Indigenous issues, and incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, while advising to start small and build capacity. This participant also stated that she had to turn away many Indigenous clients from her private

practice who wished to see an Indigenous social worker because she was not considered clinical by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. This may be indicative of a more widespread issue where such systemic barriers are preventing Indigenous clients from accessing clinical services from an Indigenous practitioner. This has not been explored in the literature and thus warrants further research to address these barriers and empower Indigenous practitioners to provide clinical services to Indigenous clients who specifically wish to see an Indigenous clinician.

There may be others besides Indigenous social workers and clients who do not feel welcome in social work spaces. For example, one participant who identified as spiritual but not religious felt that a Christian social worker would be more accepted in bringing their spirituality into their work. This idea is in contrast with the Christian participants in the study who expressed not feeling encouraged or accepted in bringing their spirituality into their work either. This claim is supported by literature indicating that the profession is "hostile" towards Christian social workers who wish to integrate their faith and their practice (Hohn et al., 2017, p. 4).

This study's participants included five Caucasian participants, one Asian participant, and one Indigenous participant. When interpreting the results, one must not assume that the individual perspectives presented in this study represent other practitioners from the same cultural groups (i.e., cultural homogeneity). Also, there are other racialized and religious groups who were not represented in this study whose perspectives warrant further inquiry. Some studies were identified in the literature which acknowledge that spirituality is often integral to the worldview and experiences of those from non-Western cultures (Pesek et al., 2006) and Muslim clients (Hall et al., 2011; Pathan, 2016). Spirituality is also noted as relevant in working with migrants and refugees (George & Ellison, 2015; Hodge, 2019; Whipple et al., 2015). This imperative is supported by the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, which states under Value 1,

Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, that social workers must "uphold each person's right to self-determination" (p. 4).

According to study participants, spirituality is largely neglected within social work education and practice. The lack of education, training, and guidance around spirituality in the social work profession is well-documented in the existing literature (Cole, 2021; Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010; Oxhandler & Ellor, 2017; Oxhandler & Giardina, 2017; Oxhandler et al., 2015). The experiences of participants from this study were consistent with the literature in that they reported spirituality was absent or only marginally included in their own social work education and training. Participants also reported that many of their workplaces throughout their social work careers were unsupportive or merely tolerated spirituality. Some reported only being able to develop the spiritual dimension of their practice once they entered private practice or a faith-based organization. While the lack of spiritual education or training in social work is well-documented, there is a lack of research on social work organizations' receptivity – or lack thereof – towards spirituality.

The lack of discussion and support with respect to spirituality within the profession often means that practitioners cannot bring their whole selves to their work, though according to Crisp (2020) the profession has begun to ask whether social workers can "cease to split off their spirituality from their professional persona" (p. 967). Spirituality could be a personal resource for practitioners – just as it could be for their clients – in a field plagued by burnout (Whitworth et al., 2019). Spirituality can be a useful form of self-care, especially in the workplace, as rituals often only take a few minutes (Crisp, 2020). Spiritual struggles could also arise as practitioners undertake complicated and difficult work. Practitioners could be supported to work through these issues or to draw on their spirituality as a source of strength. This position is consistent with that

voiced by Hohn et al. (2017) in a study involving interviews with practitioners in the United States, which posits that the Christian practitioners' faith was helpful in decreasing professional burnout.

Despite an overall lack of acknowledgment of spirituality within social work, participants did identify some pockets of presence – areas of social work where spirituality is present and normalized. The most prominent areas discussed in this study were palliative care and grief and loss, with a number of study participants working in this area. Existing research indicates that social workers working in palliative care have long been incorporating spirituality into their practice due to the spiritual issues that arise at end of life (Duncan-Daston et al., 2016; Leichty, 2013). However, there are also concerns that practitioners in this area – much like in other areas of social work – are having to rely on personal resources due to a lack of theory and guidance (Duncan-Daston et al., 2016; Leichty, 2013). Sometimes these concerns were voiced by practitioners themselves. Similar concerns have been expressed about practitioners working in the area of grief and loss (Pomeroy et al., 2021). However, the participants in this study did not express concerns about their competence in this area and some had accessed specific education and training. This also was not a focus in the study and further inquiry into this area may be warranted in order to explore practitioners' readiness to incorporate spirituality, which could also provide valuable insights for other areas of social work practice.

Practice Concerns

The study revealed several significant social work practice concerns. In terms of initial assessment, participants reported employing a variety of formal and informal approaches to assess spirituality. There was less variation among approaches to ongoing assessment and they were mostly informal, though at least one participant expressed wanting to have more formal

tools. There was similarity among participants with respect to what skills and knowledge they thought were important to use when implementing spirituality into their work with clients, though there was some variation in participants' views about whether a basic knowledge of other belief systems is important for practitioners to have. Some believed it was very important, others thought it was helpful but not necessary, and one stated that they actually preferred to come from a place of not knowing. Some scholars stress the importance of some level of knowledge of various belief systems; for example, Hall et al. (2011) and Pathan (2016) state that practitioners require knowledge of Islam and Islamic concepts and terms to work effectively with members of this group, and Verniest (2006) states that practitioners must have an understanding of an Indigenous client's culture, traditions, and beliefs in order to work with them.

Some participants mentioned the importance of naming any observed power dynamics, which could be useful – or indeed, necessary – for non-Indigenous social workers working with Indigenous clients or other marginalized groups that they are not a part of. Another skill mentioned by some participants was listening for indirect allusions to spiritual issues then asking further questions. Practitioners should be aware that spiritual issues may be overtly raised by a client, but they may not bring it up directly, which indicates a need for practitioner awareness and training to be able to pick up on such nuances and explore them further with clients. Many of the necessary skills and knowledge described by participants are consistent with principles of cultural humility, including reflecting on power and privilege, promoting collaboration and empowerment, practitioner self-awareness, open and ongoing dialogue, a non-judgmental approach, and developing relationships (Canda et al., 2020; Hodge & Bushfield, 2006).

Two participants specifically talked about adopting a "behind the scenes" approach to describe the ways in which their spirituality influenced their practice in what they viewed as a

positive way. It is possible the other participants had their own covert practices; participants were not specifically asked about this. Most of these practices were focused on the practitioner themselves and was seen as beneficial to their practice in indirect ways, such as reducing their own stress levels, helping them reflect, or engaging in self-care or personal development activities. However, one participant also reported praying for clients on his own and being part of a prayer group that did the same. Canda et al. (2020) advise caution with respect to praying for clients and argue that prayer or other “undisclosed spiritual practices directed at clients” should only be done with “a consistent stance of humility and client centeredness” that respects the client’s right to self-determination and does not ask for specific outcomes (p. 393).

Participants reported using a wide variety of tools and interventions in their practice to address concerns related to spirituality. There was some disagreement, however, about how or when it is appropriate to implement these tools. For example, one participant said he discusses spiritual reading materials with clients but does not recommend specific books, while another participant stated she has a list of specific reading materials she shares with clients. Another example was that two participants reported having prayed with clients, while another said she would not pray with a client and did not consider it appropriate because she did not work in a faith-based organization. One of the participants who had prayed with clients worked in a faith-based organization and one did not. These are two examples – discussion of spiritual reading materials and prayer with clients – in which further discussion is warranted about ethical considerations when using such interventions.

Discussion is also warranted about the use of other spiritually based tools or interventions such as introducing spiritual concepts with clients, self-disclosure (i.e., participants said they only use this when appropriate but did not clarify when exactly that would be), referrals to

others, the use of on-site spiritual services, exploring ceremony and ritual, smudging with clients, Reiki, chakras, tarot cards, hypnosis, yoga, mindfulness, and meditation. Canda et al. (2020) purport that the following conditions must be met before a practitioner should engage in a spiritually based activity with a client, at the worker's invitation: the client has expressed interest in spirituality, a "spiritually sensitive" relationship has been established, and the practitioner has relevant qualifications for the activity (p. 392). A spiritually sensitive practice is one that is attuned to the client's deepest goals and meanings, and is respectful, empathetic, knowledgeable, and skillful, and Canda et al. (2020) consider a spiritually based activity to include conversations about spiritual concepts, beliefs, and issues. While some participants in this study did have certifications or training in areas such as Reiki, meditation, and grief and loss, many reported activities for which they did not have formal qualifications, although it is unclear what qualifications might be considered "relevant" for certain activities. However, even when all three conditions are met, Canda et al. (2020) still advise to proceed "with caution" (p. 393), as introducing spiritually based activities is "risky" due to "the possibility of undue (even unintended) influence due to the perceived or actual power difference in the helping relationship" (p. 397).

A participant in this study shared an example of a time he was working with a Jewish couple, and they informed him that he was approaching the issue from a Christian perspective. While it is positive that the couple felt comfortable enough to share this with the practitioner and that the practitioner was receptive to their feedback, it does demonstrate how a social worker may be approaching the situation from their own perspective without even realizing it, and therefore unintentionally pushing their own views and potentially creating harm. A client may not always be comfortable or able to correct this view. Another participant used an example of

clients from various cultures who might understand a mental health issue they are experiencing as having bad energy attached to them, or as a form of possession, and the participant stated how she would attempt to correct that view. Though well-intended, this could also be seen as pushing the practitioner's own perspective by trying to get the client to see their experience through a Western, mental health lens rather than the client's own spiritual or cultural lens. In these types of situations, Duran and Firehammer (2016) suggest the use of metaphoric language as an effective way to communicate concepts or theories from different paradigms. They state that "all forms of healing can have commonality if the healer is open to searching for the root metaphor" (Duran & Firehammer, 2016, p. 108), which would not require the client to see the issue through the same lens as the practitioner. These two instances could be illustrative of the unintended influence that Canda et al. (2020) caution against when engaging in spiritually based activities.

Participants did describe many ways they try to ensure their use of spirituality in social work practice is ethical, but most participants did not discuss specific ethical issues that might arise or the potential for harm in this area. One participant had concerns about the use of Reiki in her social practice, and sought input from multiple sources, but remained afraid of professional repercussions for broaching the subject at all. This participant questioned how practitioners can ensure ethical practice or work through ethical issues when they lack guidance and support, or are even afraid to bring up the topic of spirituality. Only one participant explicitly mentioned the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics. Linking spirituality directly to the Code of Ethics and referring to it when considering spiritual practice issues could be useful for educators and practitioners alike. While there have been concerns raised by scholars about potential ethical issues around spirituality in social work practice, there has been little discussion about ethical guidelines pertaining to spirituality (Canda et al., 2004; Carrington, 2013).

When asked about what resources have been most helpful for practitioners in developing this area of their practice, most participants cited their greatest resources as being other people including colleagues, clients, mentors, and Elders or other spiritual teachers. This is important to remember when supporting social workers to develop their practice in this area.

Overall, practitioners were largely left to their own devices to incorporate spirituality into their work in an effective, competent, and ethical way. Participants were highly resourceful and motivated in finding their own resources, drawing on their own personal experiences, developing their skills, and applying broader social work ethical principles. Practitioners drew directly on their own experiences to incorporate spirituality into their work; for example, the practitioners who said they had prayed with clients were Christian, and practitioners who used Reiki with clients had found this practice personally helpful. The resources mentioned by participants were also largely aligned with their own personal spirituality, although most said it is important to have a basic knowledge of other belief systems. This is consistent with existing research which suggests that practitioners, lacking guidance in this area, are left to rely on their own personal experiences and resources, which raises issues of competence (Carrington, 2013; Duncan-Daston et al., 2016; Leichty, 2013). Competence in Professional Practice is Value 6 of the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, which states that practitioners must "uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service possible" (p. 8). It is questionable whether practitioners can offer high quality service related to spirituality without professional guidance.

Practitioners were very clear about their beliefs in not pushing their beliefs on clients. However, though participants did not raise this, it could be a concern – especially in areas of practice outside of clinical – if practitioners in general only really have their own perspective and experiences to draw on, and those are the only tools they have available. In clinical practice

settings, clients may have the opportunity to seek out a practitioner who aligns with their own beliefs and perspective if they wish, but this may be a concern in other areas of practice where clients do not get to choose their practitioner or the service might be involuntary, such as child welfare. Hodge and Bushfield (2006) state that an important aspect of cultural competence is the ability to use "intervention strategies that are appropriate, relevant, and sensitive to the client's spiritual worldview" (p. 106). However, practitioners may not always have access to a variety of interventions beyond those aligned with their own perspective and experiences, and in some cases may not even be aware of how their own personal perspective influences their practice. This is a major point of tension within social work practice; practitioners should not ignore spirituality entirely, but must remain within the scope of their expertise; as the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics states, practitioners must "demonstrate due care for client's interests and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence" (p. 8). Social workers need direction and guidance on how to walk this very fine line of addressing spirituality without violating ethical standards of the profession.

Limitations

The limitations in this study were mainly related to recruitment and sampling. I was not able to achieve my intended sample size of eight to 10 participants. While recruitment emails were distributed on three separate occasions through the ACSW listserve, very few participants were recruited by this means. Snowball sampling was also not very effective as a recruitment approach. Alternative ways of recruitment need to be explored for future research. The majority of participants were Caucasian which resulted in Indigenous and racialized perspectives being underrepresented. Representatives from diverse cultural and linguistic groups would have invited more diversity but was limited due to resources. The majority of participants were female, it

would be important in future research that the perspectives of other genders are represented. Additionally, the majority of participants were located in urban settings, and the experiences of rural practitioners may differ.

Implications for Social Work

The findings of this study raise a number of implications for social work education, practice, and policy, and offer directions for future research. As interpretive description is designed for use within applied disciplines, it is essential that the researcher communicate to their professional community what should be done differently in education, practice, and policy (Thorne, 2016).

Education

Scholars have been calling for the inclusion of spirituality in social work curriculum for decades, although others have also raised concerns about doing so (Cole, 2021). Despite extensive discussion, this continues to be a gap in social work education (Cole, 2021), which was noted by participants in this study. Recommendations include integrating spirituality content throughout core social work courses using a framework of person in environment (Cole, 2021) or a bio-psycho-social-spiritual approach (Senreich, 2013), or the creation of specific spirituality courses (Buckey, 2012). The findings of this study affirm the need to include spirituality in social work curriculums. The findings also indicated that spiritual issues arise in a multitude of ways across various practice contexts, which supports incorporating spirituality across core social work courses rather than as a separate course. This would be a more holistic approach that recognizes spirituality as one interconnected part of an overall understanding of wellness, rather than a separate entity. Curriculum could address both the use of spirituality in direct work with clients and the practitioner's own personal spirituality, as well as the intersection between

personal and professional. Practitioners' personal spirituality was not initially a large focus of this study, but it became clear that their own experiences were integral to their work, with both influencing each other. Practitioners' spirituality could be supported throughout their career, beginning with their education and training. Spirituality can be a resource for practitioners, and supporting practitioners in this area could ameliorate issues like burnout.

However, the incorporation of spirituality in direct practice with clients is an ethically fraught area of practice, and it is imperative that social workers receive support in developing a spiritually competent and ethical practice, once again beginning with education and training. New social workers could have the opportunity to not only learn about and discuss the history and context of the society they are practicing in and the spiritual experiences of marginalized groups, but also how they can translate that knowledge into practice in clear and specific ways. Social work students could receive instruction on the ethical use of spirituality in practice, perhaps drawing on existing tools such as Canda et al.'s (2020) "Ethical Guidelines for Spiritually Sensitive and Culturally Appropriate Practice" (p. 385) or Eguchi et al.'s (2016) "Toolkit for Reconciliation/Decolonization of Social Work Practice at the Individual, Workplace, and Community Level." Explicit links could also be made to the Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005). Though engaging in ethical spiritual practice may not always be simple and clear-cut. As stated by Canda et al. (2020), "ethical decision-making often occurs in fluid and unpredictable situations" (p. 391). Thus, it is critical that the profession grapple with these issues rather than leaving individual practitioners to do so on their own.

Practice

This study identified a number of practice topics that were largely absent from the literature, including specific interventions, types of assessment, and spiritual resources used by

practitioners; the relationship between practitioners' own spirituality and their work, especially how their work influences their spirituality in covert ways; behind the scenes spiritual practices that may positively influence practitioners' professional practice or well-being; explicit links between spirituality in social work and the Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005); and how to appropriately address spirituality with Indigenous clients, especially for practitioners who are non-Indigenous, and how this is a social justice issue. Additionally, much of the existing research with practitioners was conducted outside of Canada.

Social work practitioners require support beyond their initial education and training to navigate the use of spirituality in their practice, their own personal spirituality, and the ongoing interaction between these. As exemplified by the participants in this study, spirituality is fluid and can change and develop throughout a practitioner's career. Social workers could be supported in their own personal spirituality and in developing the spiritual aspect of their practice on an ongoing basis through professional development opportunities, mentorship opportunities, consultation groups, groups such as the staff prayer group described by one participant, supervision (with training and support for supervisors as well), and making social work spaces more welcoming to spirituality in general or being inclusive of a variety of spiritual beliefs and worldviews. Once again, as indicated in the existing literature (Carrington, 2013; Cole, 2021) as well as by the findings of this study, it would be beneficial for individual practitioners to not be left on their own to navigate spiritual issues in practice, but to be supported in integrating this dimension of their practice ethically and competently.

Policy

There could also be opportunities to empower Indigenous social workers, as well as those of other marginalized groups, to better serve their communities and help others to do so as well.

This could include removing systemic barriers, making spaces more welcoming, and providing support to establish private practices. For example, an Indigenous participant in this study described barriers that prevented many Indigenous clients from being able to access her private practice. CASW or social work regulatory bodies could advocate for changes to remove systemic barriers identified by Indigenous practitioners.

Another policy implication arising from this study is that the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and the ACSW (2019) Standards of Practice could be modified to specifically include spirituality. While I believe (as previously discussed) that some of the existing values listed in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics can be directly linked to spirituality in social work practice, it may be beneficial for spirituality to be explicitly addressed within both of these documents to provide clearer guidance for social workers with respect to spirituality.

Future Research

This study was exploratory in nature and as such raised many questions for further inquiry and exploration. Some areas for possible future research could focus on the experiences of Indigenous practitioners and practitioners from other racialized or religious groups who were not represented in this study. Research could also be conducted with practitioners working in rural areas of the province, as most of the participants in this study were located in cities. Most of the participants of this study were doing clinical work and further inquiry and support for the use of spirituality in clinical settings is needed as well as the ways in which spirituality may benefit social work practice in other settings and non-clinical work.

Future research could also explore the interactive relationship between practitioners' personal spirituality and their professional practice, as this has received limited attention in the

existing literature. The findings of this study suggest that this is a complex relationship in which both influence each other.

Finally, a useful starting point may be a survey of social work programs across Canada to assess the degree to which they address spirituality within their curriculum. This survey could perhaps focus on the perceptions of faculty, educators, and students about to what degree spirituality is included in the curriculum of their social work programs, and could be conducted electronically.

Next Steps

Knowledge dissemination is important to consider with regards to this study, which was developed through the lens of pragmatism and aims to conduct research that has practical utility. In addition, interpretive description by nature is intended to be relevant to a particular audience (Thorne, 2016), which in this case is social work practitioners, organizations, educators, and professional bodies within Alberta. Therefore, it is my intention to seek opportunities to share the findings of this research with post-secondary institutions in the province, and possibly other social work organizations and professional bodies. It is also my aim to publish findings from this study in the form of an article, perhaps in a social work education journal or a social work and spirituality journal.

Conclusion

This study was inspired by a paucity of discussion and acknowledgment of spirituality within the social work profession, which I encountered in my own professional experience and was reflected in my literature review. The research questions for this study were: How are social work practitioners incorporating spirituality into their direct practice with service users? and What informs their use of spirituality in their practice and supports their competence in this area?

With respect to how practitioners are incorporating spirituality into their work, participants in this study were using a wide variety of spiritually based methods of assessment; tools and interventions; certain skills and knowledge; in some cases, behind the scenes practices; and a number of methods to support ethical practice. Several factors informed the way participants used spirituality in their practice: practitioners' personal views, including their definitions of spirituality, their personal spiritual experiences, beliefs, practices, and resources, and why they believe spirituality is important in social work; and their practice context, including their historical and societal context and the absence of spirituality in social work. The existing literature and the findings of this study indicate that practitioners are incorporating spirituality into their work through a wide variety of methods despite a lack of instruction and guidance from the profession. This study identified a number of implications for education, practice, and policy that could support social work practitioners in ethically and competently integrating spirituality into social work practice.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

We are looking for registered social workers who:

- Are currently practicing in Alberta
- Have at least five years post-graduate experience (social work diploma or degree)
- Work primarily with adults
- Self-identify as intentionally and regularly using spirituality in their practice, according to client's belief system

We are asking participants to participate in an interview (approximately one hour in length) via phone or Zoom© to discuss their use of spirituality in practice.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Jill Ciesielski by email: jill.ciesielski@ucalgary.ca

This study is part of an MSW thesis through the University of Calgary and has been approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) at the University of Calgary (REB21-0812).

Appendix B

Consent Form

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Jill Ciesielski, MSW student
Faculty of Social Work

Supervisor:

Dr. Christine Walsh and Dr. Jennifer Hewson
Faculty of Social Work

Title of Project:

Exploring Perspectives of Social Work Practitioners Using Spirituality in Practice

Sponsor:

None

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Participation is completely voluntary and confidential.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of social work practitioners in Alberta who are using spirituality in their practice. The researcher wants to interview social workers who are regularly and intentionally using spirituality in their direct work with clients in order to learn more about how they are doing so and what helps to inform their competent and ethical practice in this area. The researcher hopes to draw on the strengths of this existing practice to help inform social work curriculum and practice in Alberta.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

You will be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, to be conducted over phone or Zoom©, depending on your preference. You will be asked to arrange to participate in the interview in a private location to ensure confidentiality. The interview will be approximately one hour in length. During the interview, you will be asked questions about how you use spirituality in your practice. After the interview, you will be invited by email to review the transcript from your interview and given the opportunity to edit, remove any content, provide additional information, or clarify your meaning.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may decide not to participate in the study at any time. You can decline to answer any questions during the interview, end the interview at any time, and/or decline to review your transcript. Even after the interview, you can decide not to have your interview included in the study up until the point that the data from your interview is amalgamated into the research dataset. Once I send you your transcript to be reviewed, you will have two weeks to provide any additional information or clarifications. If I do not receive a response from you after two weeks from the date I sent your transcript, your data will be included as is. You will have two weeks from the date I send you your transcript to withdraw from the study. After that point it will no longer be possible to withdraw from the study.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your gender, age, ethnicity, educational background, years of experience in the field, and area of practice. This information will be used to describe the group of participants as whole and will not be presented in a way that will make you identifiable.

Your interview, which will take place over phone or Zoom©, will be recorded so it can be transcribed afterwards or in the case of Zoom© will be automatically transcribed. Only the researcher and the researcher's co-supervisors will have access to the recording.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

The risks of participating in this research are expected to be minimal. Participation is confidential and participants are asked to share about their practice to the extent they are comfortable. There should be no cost associated with participation. There is also no payment for participating.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

No one except the researcher and the researcher's co-supervisors will have access to the interview recording or any other information you provide, and data will be stored in an encrypted file on a computer that requires a password and only the researcher has access to. The data will be stored for five years from the date the study is closed, at which time it will be permanently deleted. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results and your name, or any other identifying information, will not be associated with your data. You may choose to be referred to by a pseudonym in any presentation of the research data, rather than as a nameless participant. Please indicate whether you would like to be referred to by a pseudonym:

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: ____

Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results? Yes: ___ No: ___

Are you interested in being contacted after the interview to review your transcript, with the understanding that you can always decline the request? Yes: ___ No: ___

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) ____

Participant's Signature: ____ Date: ______________

Researcher's Name: (please print) ____

Researcher's Signature: ____ Date: ________________

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Jill Ciesielski
Faculty of Social Work
and Dr. Christine Walsh
and Dr. Jennifer Hewson