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Circles of Resistance: Spirituality in Social Work Practice, Education and Transformative Change

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Abstract

Spirituality comes from within and outside the self. It is meant to assist us as individuals, families and communities. It is also about resistance and it connects us to the work of social change.

The topic of spirituality is an important dialogue which educators must have with their students. In my four years of teaching, I have brought spirituality into the classroom not only by speaking about it, but by doing it. What I have learned so far, is that if I open those doors by taking the lead, it creates a safe place where students can share their spirituality.

As important as spirituality is to each individual's well being and strength, each of us has a responsibility to use it in creating a better world. It is the role of the social worker to resist oppression and become involved in political activism. The structural social work approach guides us in this role, but it lacks any spiritual dimension. What social workers need is direction based on action-oriented spirituality.

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Introduction

In my experiences outside Indigenous communities, the topic of spirituality is usually met with silence and a lowering of the eyes. It appears to make people uncomfortable which is difficult for me to understand as I see it simply as existence. In order to write about spirituality, I am faced with the dilemma of having to separate it from the whole which, of course, is problematic in itself. However, because I have had so many uplifting experiences as a social work practitioner, hopeful ones as a recent educator and student, and am committed to inclusive schooling, I have an unavoidable calling to incorporate spirituality into my research in the academy.

I believe spirituality is the connection to all that is in existence. It comes from within and outside the self. It is meant to assist us as individuals, families and communities. Spirituality is also about resistance and it connects us to the work of social change.

Thus, this paper will focus on the use of spirituality in social work practice, the teaching of it in social work programs and its importance to social change.

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Definition

The social work literature is consistent in its definition of spirituality as encompassing an individual's ultimate values, her/his relationship with others and one's perception of the sacred (Canda, 1988; Titone, 1991; Ingersoll, 1994; O'Rourke, 1997; Pellebon, Anderson & Angell; 1999; Gilbert, 2000). Carolyn Jacobs (1997) defines spirituality as "heart knowledge where wholeness, meaning and inner peace occur. Spirituality is a sense of being at one with the inner and outer worlds" (p. 172).

The literature also emphasizes that although religion can be a part of spirituality, they are not interchangeable. Religion is seen as a formalized practice that includes "an integrated belief system that provides principles of behaviour, purposes of existence, meaning of death, and an expression of reverence for a supernatural being (or beings)" (Canda, 1989, p. 37). Spirituality, on the other hand, is distinguished as "a set of personal beliefs derived from the individual's perception of self and his or her relationship to both the natural world and some metaphysical realm" (Ibid). The significant difference between the two is that religion is a structured form of spirituality that usually has a group following, whereas spirituality can include individual experiences with or without a structured belief system.

In researching the historical origins of social work, it is evident that its practice is grounded in religious sponsored agencies. Kilpatrick and Holland (1990) state that:

Our professional grandparents viewed their efforts as a way of evidencing two religious values that were immediately present in their understanding of the meaning of life – love and justice for their fellow human beings. The origins of this profession, the values which gave it birth, are to be found in the concerns of people who not only believed in individual charity but also understood that their faith called for community responses of mutual responsibility (p. 127).

I am honoured to be a part of a profession that grew out of the values of love, justice, community and mutual responsibility. Each of these values encompasses my own spirituality. They also speak clearly to the role of social work in the arena of social change as linked to spirituality.

My understanding of Aboriginal spirituality, according to the teachings that have been passed on to me, is that it is an interconnectedness and interrelationship with all life. All (both "animate" and "inanimate") are seen as being equal and interdependent, part of the great whole and as having a spirit. This view permeates the entire Aboriginal vision of life and the universe. Comparatively, there is little published writing on Aboriginal spirituality which is, in fact, conducive to our way of responsibly imparting knowledge through oral tradition. However, Sioui (1992) explains:

Where their human kin are concerned, the Amerindians' attitude is the same: all human beings are sacred because they are an expression of the will of the Great Mystery. Thus, we all possess within ourselves a sacred vision, that is, a unique power that we must discover in the course of our lives in order to actualize the Great Spirit's vision, of which we are an expression. Each man and woman, therefore, finds his or her personal meaning through that unique relationship with the Great Power of the universe (p. 9).

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Use of Spirituality in Practice and Education

For me not to implement spirituality into my social work roles as educator and practitioner is unnatural. To not be able to do so makes me feel both empty and insincere. It is a form of spiritual abuse which I experience as deeply wounding. With regards to my social work practice, I have had the good fortune to incorporate spirituality into almost all settings and situations mainly due to the fact that my work has always been within Aboriginal communities. As a social work student, I had no "education" regarding spirituality in my programs. As an educator, I am finding it infinitely challenging but increasingly rewarding to invite spirituality into the classroom.

Once again, the literature is consistent regarding the role of spirituality in social work education. Three major research studies indicate that 88.5%, 65.7% and 79% of social work students received little or no "training" on spirituality in their programs (Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994; Sheridan & Hemert, 1999; Miller, 2001).

With regards to the use of spirituality in social work practice, a literature review indicates that the topic has been largely neglected by the profession (Sermabeikian, 1994; Pellebon et al., 1999; Gilbert, 2000; Damianakis, 2001; Gotterer, 2001).

An obvious question emerges at this point. Why is it that the profession of social work has strayed so far from its roots which lie largely within the realm of spirituality? I assert that as social work moved into the period of

modernity, it allied itself with science thereby embracing a rational, linear, reductionist view of the world. This move towards gaining credibility by the social sciences and medical professions meant that spirituality would have to be severed from social work because it does not conform to this view of the world.

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Practice

The small body of literature on spirituality in social work practice focuses on grief counseling and hospice work. To be sure, these are significant areas in which spirituality is needed. However, I advocate that it be implemented within all aspects of social work. Spirituality is not only about death and dying – it is about life and living!

Social work practice cannot be whole without including the spiritual dimension. If practitioners ignore it, then they are not fully responding to their “clients”. Ideally, social work practice focuses on client strengths. Spirituality is the most powerful source of strength because everyone who chooses to go on in this world, operates on some form of faith. A spiritual value or belief can be a powerful resource in a client’s life that can be used in problem solving, coping and recovering from trauma.

Many Aboriginal helpers and writers identify a revitalization of spirituality in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. In a 1995 study by McCormick, which looked at the facilitation of healing for Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia, “establishing a spiritual connection” and “participation in spiritual ceremonies” were ranked amongst the most important components by participants (pp. 280 - 282). Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) refers to this revival as “spiritual resistance [which] flourishes through treasuring our children and honouring the visions and words of our Ancestors” (p. 45). In her research regarding Aboriginal women, writer Kim Anderson (2000) shares that “many Native women told me it felt like they had finally found something that was “ours” when they began to practice Native spirituality” (p. 133).

Often, this reclaiming of spirituality begins in healing processes with Aboriginal social workers and other helpers. It is important that the profession of social work pick up this work since “spiritual healing requires special attention because it is the spiritual aspect of Aboriginal identity that has suffered most from the effects of cultural colonialism” (Morrissette, McKenzie & Morrissette, 1993, p. 99). Thus, some healing programs ensure that they place emphasis on activism, resistance and social change as well as community recovery (Avalos, Arger, Levesque & Pike, 1997; Baskin, 1997).

Most importantly, perhaps, is the concept of incorporating spirituality as power and knowledge throughout every day life. In social work discourse, this is called “prevention”. It involves reflexive knowledge which is less preoccupied with the outcome and more concerned with the process. It encourages social workers not to construct an understanding of the client’s reality through knowledge derived only empirically as this may block other ways of knowing. Such a position begins to move the profession of social work from modernity into postmodern thought. According to this discourse, alternative means to knowledge acquisition and power are emphasized such as those that arise from emotion and intuition. Intuition, in particular, allows the social worker to have “direct, immediate knowledge of something without relying on the conscious use of reason or sense perception” (Percesepe, 1991, as cited in Damianakis, 2001). With respect to spirituality, intuition is usually rooted in a collective unconscious. In its most valuable application, social workers’ offerings of intuitive insights or hunches with their clients can affect those who experience them in integrative, powerful and meaningful ways (Richards and Bergin, 1997). To make this even more powerful, however, practitioners can assist their clients in learning how to access and implement their own intuitions and other spiritual gifts. In addition, they can also help with clients’ positive identity formation through a relationship with the collective unconscious which they share with other people.

It may be that postmodern discourse makes it much easier to begin to talk about Indigenous ways of knowing and helping. There are, of course, no Aboriginal terms for social work, but there are certainly words for helping and healing which I have always seen as my role in this area.

Aboriginal cultures make use of many spiritual techniques in healing. In fact, I do not believe that healing can occur outside of spirituality. As Aboriginal social worker, Michael Hart (2002) states, “Aboriginal philosophy and ways of knowing encompass spirituality to such a degree that it almost dictates the necessity of including spirituality in this approach” (p. 46). Traditional teachings, ceremonies, rituals, stones, water, the pipe, herbs, sitting on the earth, fasting, prayer, dreams, visions, channeling, out of body experiences, touch and food are all part of the journey to spiritual balance and well being. In addition, those who are the helpers are said to be containers or channels for healing. Their abilities come from the spirits and live inside them through blood memory. The assistance that helpers or healers pass on to others is more spiritual than any other dimension. According to Ojibway helper, Calvin Morrissette (1999), “without the recognition of spirituality, our relationships

are superficial at best" (p. 103). Thus, social work practice from an Aboriginal world view deeply involves spirituality and cannot be truly effective without it.

A significant area that I believe must be of great concern to social work is the connection, and confusion, between mental health and spirituality. I view the line between a spiritual and a psychotic experience as blurred. However, practitioners tend to diagnose some spiritual experiences and practices as "pathological symptoms of delusions, immaturity, regression, escapism, or neurosis" (Gilbert, 2000, p. 79).

In fact, what some clients see as spiritual strength is often pathologized by practitioners. Clients learn that they cannot discuss their spiritual beliefs and experiences with social workers for fear of being judged as "crazy". This has become a problematic situation for many Indigenous peoples. In Aboriginal cultures, a major focus of spirituality is the ability to communicate with the spirit world. There are many practices, such as fasting and ceremony, that are designed to help us enhance this ability. To hear the voices of spirits, then, is considered to be a strength. Yet in my social work practice, many Aboriginal clients came to me with the misdiagnosis of schizophrenia.

Another issue that concerns the connection between spirituality and mental health is depression. According to many Aboriginal Elders and Medicine People, the roots of depression are due to an "abandonment of respect for a spiritual way of life in exchange for materialistic things which overwhelm people, preventing them from looking at themselves as they really are" (Timpson, et. al., 1988, p. 6). This process involves losing conscious contact with the Creator and the spiritual parts of all life. The more this conscious contact is lost, the more our consciousness becomes numb. We lose our sense of where we are from and the direction in which we are going. Hence, depression is considered to be a spiritual illness and spiritual practices must be a part of the healing process.

Indigenous peoples have been practicing holism, which includes spirituality, since the beginning of creation. It is only recently that some Western methods are making space for incorporating these practices as it has been "proven" that they are helpful in maintaining good holistic health. In addition, it is clear that the problems of the world are not being solved by professional expertise. There is an obvious interest in self and spiritual development since books on this topic are the fastest growing reading materials in terms of non-fiction in both North America and Europe (Jayanti, 1999). Aboriginal peoples are leaders in including spirituality in the helping process. We have so much to offer in assisting in the healing of all human kind.

Around the globe, Aboriginal peoples are incorporating spirituality into research methodologies, healing and activism. Aboriginal scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Graham Smith and Russell Bishop of New Zealand, for instance, are now publishing leading works in this area. According to Tuhiwai Smith (2001), decolonization for Aboriginal peoples world wide must contain a spiritual element. She adds words of caution, however, about Westerners appropriating Aboriginal spiritual beliefs: "the spirituality industry will continue to expand as people, particularly those in First World nations, become more uncertain about their identities, rights, privileges and very existence" (p. 102). The message is clear: spirituality is essential for all peoples, but we all must go to our own.

Do social workers want to include spirituality in their practice? According to a 1994 study on the topic, they do (Sheridan et al., 1994). However, the vast majority of respondents (90.1%) supported this inclusion based on its relevance to multicultural diversity rather than on the belief that there is a spiritual dimension to human existence that needs to be addressed by social workers. This information is presented in this article in a positive light without any critique. Clearly, it suggests that many social workers are not comfortable with spirituality being on an equal footing with the biopsychosocial components of social work's current human behaviour framework. Even more troubling, however, is the implied notion that spirituality only applies to "multicultural others." When an area is assigned to multiculturalism, it means tolerance rather than equality. Thus, it lacks importance or seriousness. Furthermore, it excludes Aboriginal peoples who are not a part of multiculturalism. Certainly this area of social work needs further research from a decolonizing framework.

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Education

As a “spirituality in education advocate,” I would like to see social work programs including this topic throughout core courses on practice, policy and research. Currently, no such program exists. Certainly, however, there are social work educators like myself who bring the topic of spirituality to the faculty table and into the classroom. I believe this is pertinent for both the benefit of the clients and the students. The topic of spirituality is an important dialogue which educators must have with their students. We need to inquire about their perspectives. As consumers of our educational programs and as future professionals, their voices are valuable contributions. I also feel strongly that we have a responsibility to teach our students about self-care in doing this draining work. In my community, we refer to this as “help for the helpers”. What greater help is there than the spiritual kind?

In bringing spirituality into the social work classroom, all students must be accommodated and included which means that more than Judeo-Christian beliefs be expressed. This can be addressed by looking to the students themselves as a dialogue on spirituality “must take into account the bodies, minds and souls present in the classroom” (Dei, et. al., 2000, p. 88).

The saying “build it and they will come” seems to fit my social work teaching experiences over the past four years. In teaching a course on becoming an ally to First Nations people, I bring our spirituality into the classroom not only by speaking about it, but by doing it. This is accomplished through the use of space, guest speakers, sacred objects, offsite visits and experiential learning. I have found most students to be open, respectful and enlightened by these other ways of learning and knowing. It appears that students agree as the class has grown from 10 in the first year to 44 this year. Of course, one could argue that students would be receptive to spirituality in a course on First Nations issues because, after all, we are “such spiritual people.” So I decided two years ago to take a risk and invite the spiritual dimension into the other courses I teach – anti-oppression and human diversity and advanced social work theory and practice. To my joyful surprise, this has been met with interest and tentative participation by many students. What I have learned so far is that if I open those doorways by taking the lead in progressively speaking about spirituality, it creates a safe place where it becomes “normal” to have a spiritual dialogue. Some students then join me as leaders in these discussions where they share what spirituality means to them. This is a living example of how “the strength of our diversity is that each of us brings some contribution to the table. When we begin to think in circles rather than in hierarchies . . . we all gain from the knowledge sharing” (Dei. 2002, p. 6). It is during these moments when I know I am living my spiritual name which translates as something like “The Woman Who Passes On The Teachings”.

I am convinced that the teaching and learning about spirituality has a definite place in the classroom. It is very conducive to my understandings on how spirituality and traditional teachings are to be passed on. I have been taught that these teachings are passed on in a context of relationship and, therefore, trust and readiness to learn on the part of the listener. This face to face interaction is necessary because the teacher has a responsibility to both the teachings and the listener. Hence, because she knows the listener, she can decide what can be passed on, she can answer questions and ensure that the listener understands and knows what to do with the teachings. She can even ask that listener to mirror back to her what has been said. This is often the root of many Aboriginal people’s reluctance to pass on spiritual teachings through writing – there is no relationship with or responsibility to the listener and what that person will do with the knowledge.

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Social Change

Since spirituality encompasses everything in our lives, it cannot be seen only as an inward journey. As important as this is to an individual’s source of peace, well being and strength, each of us has a responsibility to use our spirituality in creating a better world. How I value my life, value others and through this create a life in which I can be valuable to my community and the world is the connection that explains my existence.

This connection and its emphasis on spirituality is succinctly explained by Kurt Alan ver Beek who writes “a sick child, dying livestock, or the question of whether to participate in risky social action are spiritual as well as physical problems, requiring both prayer and action” (2000, p. 33). His description of Lenca “pilgrims” marching, “singing religious songs...and blowing on their conch shells – all traditional means of calling villagers to worship” reminds me of my own community’s spiritual and holistic approach to social action. When Aboriginal peoples engage in social justice activities, our Elders, prayer, medicines, song, sacred fire and the drum are always present as sanctions of the spiritual importance of the activities.

On a deeper spiritual level is the involvement of our Elders in their communicating to us blood memories which guide us in our current efforts for social justice. In discussing research with her Hawaiian Elders, Leilani Holmes states “the stories of kupuna contain historic discourses about knowledge, memory, land, and social

change. It would be useful to ask how living memory and the stories of indigenous elders may eclipse histories taught through schooling and offer indigenous peoples a way to envision and enact social change" (Dei, et. al, 2001, p. 49).

Indigenous peoples also have allies within the social change movement. Ver Beek writes about a large group of priests supporting the Lenca through their use of "scripture, tradition and their 'pulpits' to frame the pilgrimage as a spiritual responsibility"(2000, p. 34). This action is, of course, embedded in Catholicism's liberation theology which emphasizes changing larger economic and political structures rather than merely changing individuals (Dudley and Helfgott, 1990).

I like the term "a spirituality of resistance" because, for me, it links my individual and community spirituality to social change. This helps me understand that my spirituality is not meant to simply make me feel better in times of distress.

Spirituality as responsibility, then, involves resisting the evil in this world. The evil is oppression and all it entails in its harm to all creatures of the earth and the earth herself. This resistance has always been present in the lives of spiritual people. Historically, for prophets "a spiritual form of life had to include responsiveness to the hunger or anguish of those around us, as well as seeing and resisting the authority of the arrogant and privileged who controlled the kingdom" (Gottlieb, 1999, p. 26). There have been more recent resisters such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. There have also been Aboriginal leaders who have resisted colonization such as Crazy Horse, Louis Riel and Leonard Peltier.

In today's world, it is the role of the social worker to respond to the hunger and anguish of those around them. I argue that it is also the role of the social worker to resist oppression and become involved in political activism. As has been seen, this will best be accomplished within the context of action-oriented spirituality.

Within the profession of social work is a model that focuses on transformative change. It is structural social work which is defined as viewing:

Social problems as arising from a specific societal context – liberal neo-conservative capitalism – rather than from the failings of individuals. The essence of socialist ideology, radical social work, critical theory, and the conflict perspective is that inequality: (1) is a natural, inherent (i.e. structural) part of capitalism; (2) falls along the lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, ability, and geographical region; (3) excludes these groups from opportunities, meaningful participation in society, and a satisfactory quality of life; and (4) is self-perpetuating (Mullaly, 1997, p. 133).

Thus, structural social work's primary focus is the recognition that oppression is at the core of social problems. It emphasizes that social work is to be carried out with, or on the behalf of, oppressed people. This perspective peels away the mythical belief system that if a person works hard enough and is good enough, then he/she can overcome any obstacle that life throws at him/her, in other words, the myth that all social problems can be overcome and all successes in life are achieved through individual merit alone. This is, of course, the myth of equality.

Structural social work is different from other social work models as it focuses on the structures in society (i.e. patriarchy, capitalism, racism) that oppress certain groups of people. Rather than blaming the victim for her/his situation, this approach examines the structures that create barriers to accessing resources, services and social goods. Another way in which structural social work is different from other social work models is through consciousness- raising. Mullaly (1997) emphasizes that "much of consciousness-raising occurs in the form of political education whereby structural social workers, in the course of their daily work attempt to educate service users about their own oppression and how to combat it" (p. 171). Structural social workers advocate that educating oppressed people about their oppression helps with the empowerment process. Most importantly, it stresses that social workers cannot empower people. Rather, they can only assist with the empowerment process. Structural social workers work collaboratively with those who are oppressed to help them have their own voices heard.

Structural social work also includes a historical analysis of society. This understanding is critical when viewing the impact of the harmful experiences that oppressed groups have been forced to endure and how this applies to the present day.

This analysis is particularly applicable to the destruction caused by the colonization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Thus, a structural approach acknowledges that history has an impact on groups of people and that a peoples' past is linked to their present conditions of oppression.

Although structural social work includes this historical perspective in its analysis of oppression, it lacks any discussion of culture, values and spirituality. This is problematic from an Aboriginal perspective as it omits the significance of a spiritual foundation. Hence, with regards to spirituality, structural social work is no different from conventional social work. This is where I challenge it because it does not allow for this important aspect that is so significant to Aboriginal communities and other Indigenous peoples world wide. While structural social work is anti-oppressive and focuses on social change, which is vital for working with Aboriginal communities, it does not incorporate spirituality in any way and, therefore, is not a holistic approach.

Despite acknowledging structural social work as beneficial to a critical analysis of oppression, I would not fall into the typical response which is to adapt or amend the theory to fit social work with Aboriginal communities. Rather, we as Aboriginal social workers need to go beyond structural social work perspectives to those that focus on our own knowledges and world views. This would, of course, be firmly embedded in a spiritual base which is action-oriented.

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Conclusion

Social work practitioners and educators need to be willing to let go of and challenge the conventional assumptions rooted in modernity and risk engaging in more holistic ways of experiencing our world. At the same time, we must be prepared to deal with the consequences that go with doing anti-oppression social work and social change. It is spirituality that will assist us in experiencing our world and our work in a fuller way. It is also spirituality that will help us face and overcome the consequences that will be placed in front of us.

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