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Independent Investigation

Candice Light
Smith College School for Social
Work Graduate Students' Attitudes,
Behaviors, and Experiences
Concerning Religion and Spirituality
in Social Work Practice and Social
Work Education

ABSTRACT

This study explored Smith School for Social Work students' overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. The study examined the extent to which content of religion and spirituality have been included in students' education as well as how satisfied and prepared students feel in addressing these issues in practice. Lastly, this study explored students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness. Fifty-nine students from the graduating classes of 2014-2016 who had clinical experience were recruited through social media to complete an online survey. Findings indicated a significant negative correlation between overall attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice with two variables: satisfaction with and comprehensiveness of training. As student beliefs about the importance of religion and spirituality in social work practice intensified, feelings of satisfaction with training and beliefs about comprehensiveness of training decreased. Findings also show that instructors are insufficiently covering issues of religion and spirituality in their course content, readings, and classroom discussions, and that students would feel more satisfied and prepared if this focus within ongoing, required coursework was intensified.

**SMITH COLLEGE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL WORK GRADUATE STUDENTS’
ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, AND EXPERIENCES CONCERNING
RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND
SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2015

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, social workers have shown an increased interest in religion and spirituality, its importance to clients, and its role in client assessment and practice intervention (Boorstein, 2000; Canda & Furman, 2009; Culliford, 2007; Dudley and Helfgott, 1990; Larsen, 2011; Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1992; McLatchie & Draguns, 1984; Mintz, 1978; Rosenbohm, 2011; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994; Stewart, Koeske, & Koeske, 2006). Although the terms religion and spirituality are often used interchangeably, efforts have been made to differentiate between these two often overlapping constructs (Graham & Shier, 2011; Hodge, 2002; Hodge & Boddie, 2007).

Spirituality is considered to be a personal quest for an understanding of the ultimate questions of life, about meaning, as well as the relationship with the sacred and transcendent (Barker, 2008; Carroll, 2001; Graham & Shier, 2011). *Religion* is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols shared by a community of individuals (Curlin et al., 2007; Dwyer, 2010; Koenig, 2012; Larsen, 2011).

With the movement to incorporate religion and spirituality more fully into social work education and practice, theoretical literature and research have explored the perceptions and experiences of social work faculty and practitioners, including social work students. Research

that has examined how different factors impact overall attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice have highlighted three significant main variables: (1) involvement in religious and spiritual practices; (2) views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education; and (3) education and training on religion and spirituality. With regard to these variables, research shows that religiously or spiritually active students report more positive attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice as compared to students who report inactive religious or spiritual activity (DeCoster & Burcham, 2002; Sheridan & Hemert, 1999). Additionally, research examining views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education indicates considerable support for coursework on religion and spirituality amongst social work practitioners, faculty, and graduate social work students (DeCoster & Burcham, 2002; Rosenbohm, 2011; Sheridan et al., 1994; Sheridan & Hemert, 1999).

With regard to the education and training received by social work faculty, practitioners, and social work students on religion and spirituality, the literature highlights three education-related variables that impact overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. These include: (1) satisfaction with the amount of religious/spiritual content received during their social work education; (2) perceived preparedness to address issues of religion and spiritual with clients, and (3) year in graduate school. While social work educators, graduate social work students, and clinical social workers report a lack of preparation in addressing these issues with clients, satisfaction with the amount of education and training received regarding religion and spirituality in practice differs among these three groups.

This study will extend the existing body of literature by continuing to examine the relationship between involvement in religious and spiritual practices, views on the inclusion of

religion and spirituality in social work education, and education/training on religion and spirituality with social work student attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. This study will examine how satisfied and prepared social work students feel regarding the amount and content of education and training on religion and spirituality that has been included in their graduate education at Smith College. Furthermore, this study will help better understand how Smith College School for Social Work includes content on religion and spirituality in classroom discussions, assigned readings, and written assignments in order to prepare students to address religion and spirituality in their social work practice. This study will add to the existing body of literature by collecting exploratory data and examining the relationship between these variables and student attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice.

A general limitation in the literature about spirituality and religion in social work is the lack of research involving a variety of conceptualizations regarding mental health diagnosis and treatment held by faculty, practitioners, and students. While there is research on how social work students feel about spirituality and religion in social work education and practice, there are no studies that explore the attitudes and behaviors currently held by students concerning alternative causes and beliefs for mental illness with regard to religion and spirituality. Studies are especially needed on the attitudes and behaviors currently held by master's level students concerning different causes and beliefs for mental illness and the utility of different approaches to treatment. In addition to the goals outlined above, this study will provide exploratory data on Smith MSW students' experiences and beliefs concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in the conceptualization of mental illness.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

There is a great deal of literature highlighting the importance of integrating religion and spirituality more fully into both social work practice and social work education (Harrison, 2010; Heyman, Buchanan, Musgrave, & Menz, 2006; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009; Larsen, 2011; Levin, 2010; Northcut, 2005; Sheikh & Furnham, 2000; Sherwood, 1998). In fact, the field is ethically responsible to attend to the religious and spiritual dimension; as highlighted in the code of ethics, social workers should understand a diverse cultural context and demonstrate competence when working with clients of all different religious and spiritual backgrounds (NASW, 2015). Theoretical literature and empirical research on religion and spirituality have explored many different avenues including how different personal, professional, demographic, and historical variables impact attitudes concerning religion and spirituality in social work practice. One particularly strong empirical measure that has emerged from this work is the "Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice" © (RRSP) Scale, developed by Michael J. Sheridan, Ph.D., to measure professional attitudes toward the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. This 18-item scale has demonstrated good internal consistency and construct validity. It is intended to measure respondents level of agreement with both positively and negatively worded statements such as, "Knowledge of clients' religious or spiritual belief systems is

important for effective social work practice,” and “The use of religious language, metaphors, and concepts in social work practice is inappropriate.” Higher scores indicate generally positive or accepting attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice.

The "Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice" © (RRSP) Scale is used throughout the literature on religion and spirituality in social work practice. The following literature review will focus on (1) involvement in religious and spiritual practice; (2) education and training on religion and spirituality; and (3) views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education, as three variables that impact attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. The last section of this literature review will explore the role of religion and spirituality in the conceptualization of mental illness.

Involvement in Religious and Spiritual Practice

An individual’s personal level of participation or involvement in organized religion or spirituality may have a strong impact on their attitudes of religion and spirituality’s role in social work practice. In fact, research that examines the experiences of social work educators, graduate social work students, and social work practitioners all indicate a significant positive relationship between personal level of participation/involvement in organized religion or spirituality and overall positive attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice (DeCoster & Burcham, 2002; Dudley & Helfgott, 2000, Graham & Shier, 2011; Larsen, 2011; Levin, 2010; Northcut, 2005; Sheikh & Furnham, 2000; Sheridan & Amato-von Hemert, 1999; Sherwood, 1998). In an examination of social work educators, Dudley and Helfgott (2000) surveyed 53 full-time faculty from four institutions in two Eastern states regarding the personal involvement in religious and spiritual practices and whether spirituality could be empowering to clients. In this study, higher frequency of attending religious services was significantly related to perceiving

spirituality as an “empowerment strategy.” This suggests that social work educators held a generally positive attitude towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice when viewing spirituality as an “empowerment strategy.”

In researching graduate social work students, DeCoster and Burcham (2002) surveyed 124 students at a large mid-south university concerning their attitudes about incorporating client religion into practice. Religiously active students reported feeling more comfortable in discussing religion and concepts about life after death, and were more likely to pray with a client as compared to students who reported inactive religious activity. This suggests that student participation in religion or spirituality has a positive relationship to overall attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice, a finding that is congruent to social work educators.

In researching practitioners, Sheridan (2004) randomly surveyed 204 licensed clinical social workers in a mid-Atlantic state on what variables influence the behaviors of practitioners in utilizing religious and spiritual interventions in practice. Among the variables studied, “current participation in communal religious or spiritual services” and “current participation in private or personal religious or spiritual practices” were found to have a positive relationship to overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. This suggests that a practitioner’s level of participation and involvement in religion or spirituality is associated with their overall attitude towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice.

Literature that focuses on the significant relationship between personal level of participation/involvement in organized religion or spirituality and overall attitudes towards religion and spirituality in social work practice simultaneously highlights the similarities that exist among social work educators, graduate social work students, and social work practitioners.

The implications of this research highlight the need for social work educators, graduate social work students, and social work practitioners to become aware of their own attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors around religion and spirituality and how their personal background can impact their assessment of clients and practice interventions.

Education and Training on Religion and Spirituality

An individual's education and training involving religion and spirituality in practice may have a strong impact on their attitudes of religion and spirituality's role in social work practice. Research that examines the educational and training experiences of social work educators, social work graduate students, and social work practitioners concerning religion and spirituality in practice all highlight remarkable findings when exploring the variables of satisfaction, preparedness, and year in graduate school.

Satisfaction. Satisfaction with the amount of education and clinical training received regarding religion and spirituality in practice differs among social work educators, graduate social work students, and clinical social workers. For example, Sheridan et al. (1994) surveyed 280 full time social work educators from 25 schools of social work about their views on the use of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice. Respondents as a whole reported a "moderate" position in regards to their satisfaction with the amount of education and clinical training they received regarding religion and spirituality in practice. However, examination of individual responses reveals that almost an equal number of respondents were generally "satisfied" with the amount of training they received (37.5%), as were generally "dissatisfied" with their training (36.5%) suggesting that social work educators have very different experiences regarding their education and training on religion and spirituality in practice.

In comparison to educators, graduate social work student respondents in Sheridan's (1999) previously described study reported a slightly "dissatisfied" position in regards to satisfaction with their education and clinical training regarding religion and spirituality in practice. Examination of individual responses reveals a higher percentage of respondents who were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the amount of training they received (41.1%) compared to those who stated they were "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" (28.8%). About one-third (30.4%) indicated they had a "neutral" stance on the issue. This suggests that graduate social work students report having a generally unfavorable experience when it comes to the amount of education and training they received regarding religion and spirituality in practice. A possible explanation for this finding might be that more recent trainees have a greater awareness of the growing needs of the emerging clinical populations.

Similar to social work trainees, active clinical social workers were asked to rate their satisfaction with the amount of education and clinical training they received regarding religion and spirituality in practice (Sheridan, 2004). Respondents reported a somewhat "dissatisfied" position in regards to their education and clinical training in this area. However, further examination of the individual responses reveals a much higher percentage of respondents who were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the amount of training they received (47.5%) compared to those who stated they were "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" (18.8%). About one-third indicated they had a "neutral" stance on the issue. This suggests that clinical social workers report having a generally unfavorable experience when it comes to the amount of education and training they received regarding religion and spirituality in practice.

Preparedness. Research that shows differing levels of satisfaction between educators, students, and practitioners with regards to education and training on religion and spirituality also

highlights an overall lack of preparedness in addressing these issues with clients. While research shows that social work educators, graduate social work students, and social workers have differing views on the amount of education and clinical training received regarding religion and spirituality in social work practice, it simultaneously highlights a perceived lack of preparation in addressing these issues with clients (Sheridan, 1994; Sheridan, 2004; Sheridan & Hemert, 1999). For example, in Sheridan et al.'s (1994) study of social work educators' views on the use of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice, only a small percentage indicated that spiritual and religious material was ever presented (2.7 % "often"; 8.6% "sometimes"). More than half (59.0%) indicated that content related to religious or spiritual issues was "never" presented while about a third (29.7%) indicated that it was "rarely" presented; These findings indicate that the substantial majority (88.5%) reported receiving little or no graduate training on content in this area, highlighting the dire need to integrate religious and spiritual content in social work curriculum.

In researching preparedness within student populations, Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert's (1999) distributed a questionnaire to 208 master's level graduate students drawn from two large research institutions, one public and one private. While students reported positive or favorable views of religion and spirituality in social work practice, the majority (65.7%) reported having little or no training in this area. While this finding is congruent to social work educator's overall lack of preparation, it also indicates that education and clinical training on religion and spirituality in practice has notably improved from one generation to the next.

Patterns of little to no training also hold true for social work clinicians. In researching clinical social workers, Sheridan (2004) indicated that attitudes and behaviors in the area of religion and spirituality are in sharp contrast to the amount of education and training in this area

reported by most respondents. Despite strong attitudes that religion and spirituality are an important part of practice, only 12.3% reporting having received any graduate level training in religion or theology outside of their social work education. More importantly, respondents reported little exposure to content on religion or spirituality and practice during their social work education. Specifically, 33.8% stated that content related to religious or spiritual issues was “never” presented; 50.5% said that it was “rarely” presented; 14.7% reported “sometimes,” and only 1% reported “often.” Thus, a substantial majority (84.3%) reported receiving little or no instruction in this area suggesting that practitioners are using spiritually derived interventions without formal training.

Year in graduate school. Empirical research around student development in social work programs and how it impacts student attitudes about religion and spirituality in social work practice is scarce. In their examination of graduate social work students attitudes about incorporating client religion into practice, DeCoster and Burcham (2002) found that students in their second year of a Master’s in Social Work Program reported feeling somewhat more prepared at assessing client religion, more comfortable discussing death, and more comfortable praying with clients as compared to first year MSW students. This suggests that overall graduate training may facilitate preparedness and has a cumulative effect on students. It also highlights year in graduate school as a variable that may have a significant positive relationship to overall positive attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice. As such, students in their last year of graduate school may demonstrate stronger beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice as compared to students in their earlier years of graduate school.

Views on the Inclusion of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education

Research that examines the experiences of social work faculty and graduate students in regards to religion and spirituality in social work education indicates considerable support for coursework on religion and spirituality (Dudley and Helfgott, 2000; Sheridan et. al.'s, 1994; Sheridan et. al., 2004) For example, in Sheridan et al.'s (1994) study of social work educators, a curriculum question asked respondents whether or not they would be in favor of a course on religion and spirituality if one were offered in their program. They could select one of four responses: oppose the course; support it only as an elective; support it as a requirement in the clinical track only; and support it as a required course. The majority of social work faculty indicated that they would support coursework as an "elective" (62.4%). Approximately equal amounts of faculty indicated they would vote against such a course (16.1%) or support it as a "required course for all students" (13.8%). Only a small percentage (6.2%) stated they would support it as a "required course for clinical students only." Four other respondents (1.5%) commented that they would rather see such content infused into existing courses. Sheridan et al. found that the most powerful predictor for support for inclusion of content on religion and spirituality was faculty views concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. Those who favored a required course showed the most positive attitudes on the relevance of religion and spirituality to practice, while faculty who were against a specialized course showed the most negative attitudes. These results represent mixed views and suggest that all views need to be heard and better understood as programs move forward to address issues of religion and spirituality in social work curriculum.

Similar to social work faculty, research that examines the experiences of graduate students in regards to religion and spirituality in social work education indicates considerable

support for coursework on religion and spirituality. Graff (2007) surveyed 324 undergraduate social work students from seven schools accredited by the CSWE in the state of Texas regarding the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education. Students were asked to complete a four-page Religion/Spirituality and Social Work Questionnaire aimed at uncovering students' personal spiritual beliefs, their beliefs about the use of religion/spiritual interventions in practice, and their beliefs about the inclusion of this content in social work education programs. Again, respondents agreed that social work courses should include content on religion and spiritual diversity as well as content on dealing with religious and spiritual issues in practice.

The Role of Religion and Spirituality in the Conceptualization of Mental Illness

Thus far, the literature reviewed has focused on (1) personal level of participation or involvement in religion and spirituality, (2) education and training, and (3) views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education as variables that impact attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. The following paragraphs will explore the role of religion and spirituality in the conceptualization of mental illness.

Cross-disciplinary theoretical and empirical research shows that many groups do not conceptualize mental health and illness according to the criteria within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 5; American Psychiatric Association, 2014) (Ally & Laher, 2008; Gale Robison, & Rapsomatioti, 2014; Houran, Kumar, Thalbourne, & Lavertue, 2002; Earl et al., 2014; Edman & Johnson, 1999; Marohn, 2014; McLatchie & Draguns, 1984; Roxburgh, 2014; Salkeld, 2014; Somé, 2009; Stanford & Philpott, 2011). For example, according to Shamanic beliefs and practices, healing comes in many different forms involving the spiritual plane, mind, and soul; there is the “seen world” and the “unseen world” (Somé, 2009). While all areas must be considered when addressing mental illness, Shamanic practices look to the spiritual realm first.

Shamans believe that mental disturbances such as psychosis result when a person does not get assistance in dealing with the presence of energy from the spiritual realm (Marohn, 2014). Furthermore, heavy dosing with anti-psychotic drugs is seen to compound the problem and prevent integration, which could lead to soul development and growth in the individual who has received these energies.

In addition to spiritual practices that have alternative views on mental health and illness, there are many other cultural groups, including South African Muslim Faith Healers (Ally & Laher, 2008), Filipino Americans (Edman & Johnson, 1999), Evangelical Protestants (McLatchie & Draguns, 1984), Baptist Senior Pastors (Stanford & Philpott, 2011), and Complementary and Alternative Medicine Practitioners (Salkeld, 2014) that also attribute physical and psychological problems to various spiritual and/or religious experiences and beliefs. For example, McLatchie and Draguns (2001) surveyed 152 members of liberal and traditional (Evangelical, Fundamentalist) Protestant churches to examine their concepts of mental health. Their research concluded that Evangelical Protestants believe mental illness is a spiritual problem requiring spiritual remedies. Their data further showed that theological conservatives felt a severely depressed person had a spiritual problem and also gave credence to the idea of demon possession in the cases of some mentally ill persons. Furthermore, many religions incorporate components such as witchcraft and spirit possession – all of which are thought to influence the behavior of a person so as to resemble that of a mentally ill individual (Karim, Saeed, Rana, Mubbasher, & Jenkins, 2004; Morrison & Thornton, 1999).

Muslim faith healers also are a cultural group that holds alternative views on mental health and illness, and attribute physical and psychological problems to various spiritual and/or religious experiences and beliefs. Ally and Laher (2007) interviewed six Muslim Healers in a

Johannesburg community on their perception of mental and spiritual illness in terms of their understanding of the distinctions between the two, the etiologies, and the treatments. These faith healers elaborated on the causes of spiritual illness that produce medical and/or psychological symptoms. According to the faith healers interviewed, spiritual illness in Islam can be split into two broad categories: jaadoo (black magic) and ill will (nazar). *Black magic*, as derived from the interviews, is said to be achieved using plants (that have hallucinative properties) or through the help of *jinn* (a species that exists on Earth in a realm of their own). According to the faith healers, gaining mastery over the *jinn* is a process that is dangerous, bears risks to one's sanity, and requires the reciting of specific Surah (Verses) from the Qur'aan. According to the faith healers, *ill will*, or the evil eye, is the second broad category of spiritual illness. It is believed that the evil eye results in lethargy, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep patterns, back luck and misfortune; symptoms common to an individual experiencing a clinical depression.

Researchers in the Philippines report that Filipinos frequently attribute physical and psychological problems to "weak soul" (Magos, 1986), spirits (Uy, 1980), and to hot/cold imbalances (Ponteras, 1980), and highlight that Filipinos develop and prefer spiritualistic and shamanistic treatments for these problems. Data obtained from Peralta, Danko, and Johnson (1995) suggest that foreign-born Filipinos and U.S.-born Filipinos differ little from one another and strongly resemble persons of Chinese, Hawaiian, and Japanese ancestries in their beliefs and belief structures. This data illustrates how beliefs indigenous to the Philippines continue to exist in some form among Filipinos residing in the United States (Edman & Johnson, 1999).

It is important that different causes and beliefs for mental problems and the utility of different approaches to treatment are considered across various racial/ethnic groups. An understanding of diverse belief systems is imperative if one is to holistically and effectively treat

individuals. Although the DSM-5 (2014) states that cultural considerations- which include religious and spiritual factors- are important in the evaluation and treatment of individuals, there exists a tendency for it to be dismissed as mere superstition (Sheikh & Furnham, 2000). Likewise, there are many modern practitioners who believe in the existence of a supernatural realm, yet would not make a diagnosis by religious or spiritual variables.

Summary

The literature reviewed has focused on how personal level of participation/involvement in religion and spirituality, education and training, and views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education all impact attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. Research that examines the experiences of social work educators, graduate social work students, and social work practitioners all indicate a significant positive relationship between personal level of participation/involvement in organized religion or spirituality and overall positive attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice. Research that examines the educational and training experiences of social work educators, social work graduate students, and social work practitioners concerning religion and spirituality in practice highlights significant findings when exploring the variables of satisfaction, preparedness, and year in graduate school. Satisfaction with the amount of education and clinical training received regarding religion and spirituality in practice differs among social work educators, graduate social work students, and clinical social workers. While research shows that social work educators, graduate social work students, and social workers have differing views on the amount of education and clinical training received regarding religion and spirituality in social work practice, it highlights an overall perceived lack of preparation in addressing these issues with clients amongst all three populations. Research also highlights that year in graduate school is a

variable that may have a significant positive relationship to overall positive attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice. Research that examines views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education indicates considerable support for coursework on religion and spirituality amongst social work practitioners, faculty, and graduate social work students. Furthermore, a growing body of empirical research has also discovered that different populations attribute or link spiritual or religious beliefs to the etiology and treatment of mental illness highlighting the need for studies that research varying approaches to the relationship between mental illness and religion and spirituality.

Contribution to the Literature

This study will add to the existing body of literature by continuing to examine the relationship between students' current level of involvement in organized religion or spirituality and their belief that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice. Given the changes that have occurred with regard to multiculturalism and diversity in training programs over the past 10 years, there is a clear need to examine the *current* experiences of social work students in graduate school programs, which will allow us to understand student's attitudes and training experiences and observe whether religion and spirituality have been integrated more fully into social work education. By researching Smith College School for Social Work students, multifarious attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning religion and spirituality can begin to be explored with the intent of adding new research to the existing body of literature on religion and spirituality in social work practice and education. There is a need to better understand how Smith College School for Social Work includes content on religion and spirituality in their classroom discussions, assigned readings, and written assignments in order to prepare students to address religion and spirituality in their social work practice. This study will

examine how satisfied and prepared students feel regarding the amount of content on religion and spirituality in social work practice that has been included in their graduate social work education at Smith College thus far. While there is research on how social work students feel about spirituality and religion in social work education and practice, there are no studies that explore the attitudes and behaviors currently held by students concerning alternative causes and beliefs for mental illness with regard to religion and spirituality. This study will provide exploratory data on Smith MSW students' experiences and beliefs concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in the conceptualization of mental illness and how they respond to information about “spirits.” In addition, research shows that students report “moderate” comfort addressing religion in general terms with clients (DeCoster & Burcham, 2002). However, there have been no studies that examine a student's comfort level in addressing culturally diverse causes and beliefs for mental illness with treatment teams. These questions will be the focus of this thesis with the intent to build on previous research.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Specifically, this research study sought to answer five research questions:

1. What is the relationship between students' current level of involvement in organized religion or spirituality and their belief that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice? It was hypothesized that there is a significant positive relationship between students' participation/involvement in organized religion or spirituality and the belief that religion and spirituality play an important part in social work practice, as measured by the RRSP.
2. What is the relationship between a student's year in graduate school and student's beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice? It was

hypothesized that students in their last year of graduate school would demonstrate stronger beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice, as measured by the RRSP, compared to students in their first year or second year of graduate school.

3. What is the relationship between a student's views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education and student's beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice? It was hypothesized that students who support a "required course for all students" on religion and spirituality would demonstrate stronger beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice, as measured by the RRSP, compared to students who support a course as an "elective" or not at all.
4. What is the relationship between graduate level training on religion and spirituality and student's beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice? Questions designed to assess a student's education and training on religion and spirituality were divided into four variables listed below with the corresponding hypothesis:
 - (a) Satisfaction with the amount of religious/spiritual content received during their social work education. It was hypothesized that as the RRSP increases, student satisfaction, regarding the amount of content on religion and spirituality in social work practice that has been included in their graduate social work education at Smith College thus far, will decrease;
 - (b) Perceived preparedness to address issues of religion and spiritual with clients. It was hypothesized that as the RRSP increases, student's will report feeling less prepared to address religion and spirituality in social work practice by the graduate level training they received regarding religion and spirituality;
 - (c) Year in graduate school. It was hypothesized that students in their last year of graduate school will demonstrate

stronger beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice compared to students in their first year or second year of graduate school; (d) Comprehensiveness of students' graduate level training on religion and spirituality, including specific courses, readings, and class discussions they have received at Smith College School for Social Work thus far. It is hypothesized there is a significant positive relationship between student reports of "comprehensive" to address religion and spirituality in social work practice and the belief that religion and spirituality play an important part in social work practice, as measured by the RRSP.

5. What are Smith MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how do they respond to information about "spirits"?

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this research study is to better understand Smith College MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and social work education. This study utilized the "Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice" (RRSP) scale, an 18-item self-report measure, to measure professional attitudes of social work students towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. This research study assessed the relationship between RRSP scores and three main variables: (1) Students' current level of involvement in organized religion or spirituality; (2) Students' year in graduate school; (3) Students' views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education.

This study also explored how SCCSW students feel that content on religion and spirituality is being addressed in the Smith College School for Social Work curriculum. This study collected exploratory data on the extent to which content of religion and spirituality have been included in classroom discussions, assigned readings, and written assignments and examined how satisfied students feel regarding the amount of this content in their graduate social work education thus far. It also examined if students feel their graduate level training prepared them to begin to address religion and spirituality in social work practice.

Lastly, this study collected exploratory data on Smith College MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how they respond to information about "spirits."

Procedure

Human Subjects Review approval was sought from Smith School for Social Work and was received (See Appendix A). Participants were recruited by using social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and the Smith College School for Social Work homepage. A brief explanation of the study was provided along with a link for students to click on that brought them directly to the survey. After establishing eligibility, the informed consent was presented (See Appendix B). Participants were required to indicate their agreement before moving forward with the remainder of the survey. If participants agreed, they were automatically sent to the research study then brought to a thank you page after completion. . If participants disagreed, they were thanked for their time and exited the survey.

Sample

Purposive sampling (n=59) was used to generate participants for this study. A total of 75 participants accessed the survey. Of those, five were not Smith students, six left the consent blank, and two did not answer any questions after the consent. From these 62 participants, one case was removed that was blank after "age" and two participants did not answer the RRSP or comprehensiveness questions resulting in no score for those measures. The population of this study included graduate students from the Smith College School for Social Work graduating classes of 2014, 2015, and 2016 who had *any* experience either working or interning in the field of Social Work. Of these 62 students, about half (45.2%) were A'15, (anticipating graduation in 2015), and equal amounts were A'14 (25.8%) and A'16 (29.0%). The majority of the participants

(90.3%) identified as “female”; 3 identified as “genderqueer;” 2 as “male;” and 1 as “transgender.” The average age of the participants was 28 years old with a range from 23 to 46 years.

In collecting data on the religious/spiritual affiliations of participants, a list was provided instructing participants to check all that apply or write in their own. A variety of religious/spiritual affiliations were reflected in the sample. The majority was identified with a Judeo-Christian religion (Jewish, 25.8%; Christian, 19.4%). A spiritual philosophical approach (Buddhist, 12.9%; Spiritualist, 12.9%; Existentialist, 4.8%) was reflected just as much as Agnostic (17.7%), Atheist (17.5%), and none (17.7%). A few identified as Muslim (1.6%) and Hindu (1.6%) and one person each endorsed a complex sense of religion characterized by the following influences: Apache, Quakerism and Taoism, Interfaith, Pagan, Secular Humanist, Unitarian Universalist.

Measures

Role of religion and spirituality in practice (RRSP) scale. Student attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in practice were measured through responses to an 18-item instrument, the “Role of Religion, and Spirituality (RRSP) scale. Items include both positively and negatively worded statements such as, “Knowledge of clients' religious or spiritual belief systems is important for effective social work practice,” and “The use of religious language, metaphors, and concepts in social work practice is inappropriate.” Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with scale items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree.” Following reversed scoring of the negatively worded items, responses to individual items were summated into a single score. Higher scores indicate generally positive or accepting attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice.

The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency and construct validity, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from $\alpha = .82$ to $\alpha = .88$ (Sheridan, 2000; Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999; Sheridan et al., 1994). Cronbach's alpha in the current study was $\alpha = .78$.

Involvement in religious and spiritual practices. Using a single item, respondents were asked to rate their involvement in an organized religion or spiritual practice using a Likert 5-point scale. Higher scores indicate a more active involvement in an organized religion or spiritual practice.

Inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education. Using a single item, respondents were asked if they would be in favor of a course on social work and religion and spirituality if one were offered in their program. They could select one of three responses: oppose the course; support it only as an elective; and support it as a required course.

Education and training on religion and spirituality. Questions designed to assess a student's education and training on religion and spirituality were divided into four variables. These include: (1) satisfaction with the amount of religious/spiritual content received during their social work education; (2) perceived preparedness to address issues of religion and spirituality with clients, and (3) year in graduate school; and (4) comprehensiveness of students' graduate level training on religion and spirituality, including specific courses, readings, and class discussions they have received at Smith College School for Social Work thus far.

Satisfaction. Using a single item, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the amount of content on religion and spirituality in social work practice that has been included in their graduate social work education at Smith College using a Likert 5-point scale. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of satisfaction regarding amount of content on religion and

spirituality in social work practice that has been included in their graduate social work education at Smith College thus far.

Preparedness. Using a single item, respondents were asked to rate whether they felt the graduate level training they received regarding religion and spirituality prepared them to begin to address religion and spirituality in my social work practice using a Likert 5-point scale. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of preparedness in beginning to address religion and spirituality in their social work practice.

Year in graduate school. Using a single item, respondents were asked to select their class year from three responses.

Comprehensiveness. Three items were used to assess the comprehensiveness of students' graduate level training on religion and spirituality received at Smith College School for Social Work. Using a Likert 5-point scale, respondents were asked to rate the extent that issues of religion and spirituality was included in (1) specific courses; (2) readings; and (3) class discussions at Smith College School for Social Work. Higher scores indicate a greater inclusion in each of the three identified areas. Responses to the three items were summated into a single score, ranging from 3-15. Higher scores indicate greater levels of comprehensiveness of religion and spirituality in education. The scale demonstrated moderate internal validity with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .75$.

Biases and Limitations

While Smith College School for Social Work is a co-ed graduate program, it has historically been an all-women's college. These gender differences were reflected in the sample. In addition, since the survey was administered online, respondents were limited to students who likely regularly utilize the social media platforms and school communication methods. Only

students who utilize Facebook, Twitter, or the SCSSW home page had access to the recruitment message that notified students of the survey. While the age ranged from 23 to 46, the average age of the participants was 28 years old and might reflect a possibly or particular bias. In addition, the majority of respondents fell into a Judeo-Christian religious grouping that may impact their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how they respond to information about “spirits.”

CHAPTER IV

Results

This research study examined Smith College MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and social work education.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were completed for all individual items including gender, age, religious/spiritual affiliation, class year, and single item measures. Descriptive analyses were also run on survey scores for the RRSP and the comprehensiveness scale.

A series of correlations were run between the RRSP score and the following six variables: (1) involvement in organized religion or spirituality; (2) views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education; (3) satisfaction; (4) preparedness; (5) year in graduate school; (6) comprehensiveness.

T-tests were run to examine groups' differences in RRSP scores between those who thought there should be a required course, or no course/an elective course as well as a one-way ANOVA by year in graduate school.

Role of religion and spirituality in practice scale (RRSP). As a whole, respondents showed a relatively high mean rating on this measure, indicating generally positive or accepting attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in practice. Respondents reported scores from 39 to 79, with a mean rating of 69, on a scale ranging from 19 to 95.

Involvement in religious and spiritual practices. Respondent as whole reported being uninvolved in a religious or spiritual practice (See Appendix C). Half of all participants (50%) indicated they “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with being involved in an organized religion or spiritual practice as compared to about one-third (36.6%) that indicated, “strongly agreed” or “agreed.”

A correlation was run to determine if there was an association between students’ participation in religion/spirituality and overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. No significant correlation was found.

Inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education. Respondents were asked if they would be in favor of a course on social work and religion and spirituality if one were offered in their program (Table 3). The majority (67.8%) indicated supporting a course as an “elective only” as compared to 28.8% that indicated supporting it as a “required course.” A small percentage (3.2%) indicated not supporting a course on religion and spirituality.

A t-test was run to see if there was a difference in RRSP scores between those who thought there should be a required course and those who endorse an elective course/no course. No significant differences were found.

Satisfaction. Respondents as a whole reported a dissatisfied position in regards to their education and clinical training in this area (See Appendix D). Examination of responses reveals a much higher percentage of respondents who were “very unsatisfied” or “unsatisfied” with the

amount of content on religion and spirituality included in their education at Smith College thus far (49.2%) compared to those who were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” (17.2%). About one-third (33.9%) indicated they had a neutral stance on the issue.

A correlation was run to determine if there was a relationship between satisfaction with religious/spiritual content and RRSP. A significant negative correlation was found ($r=-.405$, $p=.001$).

Preparedness. Respondents as a whole reported a dissatisfied position in feeling prepared to address issues of religion and spirituality in their practice (See Appendix E). Examination of responses revealed that about half of respondents (55.2%) “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with feeling prepared compared to only 19% who were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” (17.2%). About a quarter (25.9%) indicated they had a neutral stance on the issue.

A correlation was run to determine if there is a relationship between preparedness and RRSP score. No significant correlation was found.

Year in graduate school. Respondents from all graduating classes were represented; A'14 (25.8%); A'15 (45.2%); A'16 (29.0%). A correlation was run to determine if there was an association between students' year in graduate school and overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. No significant correlation was found. A one-way ANOVA was also run to determine if there was a difference in mean RRSP scores by year in graduate school and no significant differences were found.

Comprehensiveness. Utilizing the three item comprehensiveness scale, respondents as a whole showed a relatively low mean rating on this measure, indicating a lower degree of inclusion of issues of religion and spirituality in (1) specific courses; (2) readings; and (3) class

discussions at Smith College School for Social Work (See Appendix F). Respondents reported scores from 3 to 12, with a mean rating of 5.5 on this 3-15 point scale.

A correlation was run to determine if there is a relationship between comprehensiveness and RRSP. A significant negative correlation was found ($r = -.317$, $p = .015$)

Alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors. Lastly, this study collected exploratory data on Smith College MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how they respond to information about "spirits." The majority of respondents (69%) indicated they have "worked with a client who reported seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost" in some manifestation as compared to a third (31%) who indicated they have not worked with such a client.

Furthermore, over half (56.4%) felt that "spiritual or religious factors were as important, if not more important, than biological, psychological, or social factors in explaining the cause of a client's report of seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost" in some manifestation. About a third (36.4%) disagreed with the above statement and a small minority (7.3%) were "unsure."

Students were then asked if they felt comfortable communicating to treatment teams about the possibility that spiritual or religious factors should be considered in explaining a client's report of seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost" (See Appendix G). Respondents as a whole indicated they felt very comfortable in communicating to treatment teams. Examination of responses revealed the majority (61.24%) "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with feeling comfortable as compared to only 15.8% who "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" while 22.8% of respondents indicated a neutral stance on the issue.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This research study extended the existing body of literature by continuing to examine the relationship between social work student attitudes concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and their involvement in religious and spiritual practices, views on the inclusion of religion and spirituality in social work education, and education/training on religion and spirituality. This study examined how satisfied and prepared social work students felt regarding the amount and content of education and training on religion and spirituality that has been included in their graduate education at Smith College. Furthermore, this study helped better understand how Smith College School for Social Work includes content on religion and spirituality in classroom discussions, assigned readings, and written assignments in order to prepare students to address religion and spirituality in their social work practice. This study also added to the existing body of literature by collecting exploratory data on Smith College MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how they respond to information about "spirits."

Role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice Scale (RRSP)

As a group, Smith Social Work students tended to have a positive or favorable attitude towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice, which is consistent with previous studies using the RRSP. Smith students believe that religion and spirituality have an important place in the field of social work practice and training. It is valuable to research the perceptions and experiences of students with regard to how spirituality and religion are addressed in both their didactic education and practice in the field because religious and spiritual beliefs are important sources of meaning and resources of support for people. This finding is also significant because it runs complimentary to the values governing the social work field. Social workers are ethically responsible to attend to the religious and spiritual dimension and should understand a diverse cultural context and demonstrate competence when working with clients of all different religious and spiritual backgrounds.

Involvement in Religious and Spiritual Practices

The majority of students at the Smith College School for Social Work report being uninvolved in a religious or spiritual practice. Contrary to the literature, there was not a significant correlation between students' participation in religion/spirituality and overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. Students' positive or favorable attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice appear to be influenced by variables other than their personal level of participation or involvement in organized religion or spirituality. This finding warrants further exploration. It may be that with greater training on intersectionality and anti-racism work, students at Smith College School for Social Work are better able to separate their personal views or behaviors

regarding religion and spirituality from their professional ones. However, this may be an emerging trend in the field at large given ongoing attention to social justice issues.

Inclusion of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education

Consistent with previous research, students were generally in favor of a course on social work and religion and spirituality, supporting a course as an “elective only” as compared to a “required course” or none at all. However, while the literature indicates that views concerning the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice are a powerful predictor for support for the inclusion of content on religion and spirituality, this study did not find such a correlation. Instead, this study indicated that a student's attitude towards the role of religion and spirituality in practice was not related to their views on the inclusion of such content in their social work education. This may suggest that students are compartmentalizing the appropriateness of religion and spirituality in social work practice and social work education. It may be that students are better able to separate their personal views or behaviors regarding religion and spirituality from their professional ones while also demonstrating how students are able to practice independently from their own personal biases or lenses.

Satisfaction

Consistent with previous research on students' satisfaction rates regarding the amount of education and clinical training received on religion and spirituality in practice, SCSSW students were generally dissatisfied. While research continues to indicate student dissatisfaction, academic institutions appear slow in adopting the necessary changes to respond to this need that emerges from the literature. This unfortunately is not surprising given the amount of time and effort that is required in making curriculum changes. Academic institutions, like Smith College School for Social Work, have tried to improve student access to content on religion and

spirituality by offering electives like "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice." However, students appear to desire more of this content in their regular classes. Interestingly, students are generally *not* in favor of a course on religion and spirituality being required, indicating there is a fine line between what is satisfactory to students. There are a variety of reasons that might explain this fine line. It may be that students who recognize the importance of religion and spirituality are also able to recognize intersectional identities more. Students may feel that there are a variety of courses that have bearing on a patient lives and do not want to necessarily privilege religion and spirituality over other aspects of identity; understanding that religion and spirituality may be personally significant but not always relevant for others.

A significant negative correlation was found between satisfaction with religious/spiritual content and attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education (RRSP); feeling more favorable towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education was related to feeling more dissatisfied with the amount of religious and spiritual content received in their education. Given that content on religion and spirituality continues to remain undertrained, it seems appropriate that students who value the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education would be associated with dissatisfaction. Students' report of being dissatisfied with this aspect of their graduate education implies that their training is not living up to personal expectations, and is likely not meeting professional expectations of the program. While personal expectations may vary considerably, falling short of the mark professionally means that students may feel they are entering the field unprepared to treat individuals for whom religion and spirituality is an important component of their treatment concerns and strategies. Student dissatisfaction may be an important indicator of

important areas where training can be further developed to meet the ethical standards of the field, and the relationship between satisfaction and the role of preparedness is discussed further below. It would be worthwhile for curriculum committees to work towards integrating more content on religion and spirituality into all classes at Smith College School for Social Work.

Preparedness

As a whole, SCSSW students reported they felt unprepared to address issues of religion and spirituality in their practice, as reflected in their general dissatisfaction regarding the amount of education and clinical training received on religion and spirituality in practice. With regard to practice, feeling "unprepared" is more detrimental than being "unsatisfied," since the purpose of graduate school is to prepare an individual to practice professionally. Students who feel unprepared to address issues of religion and spirituality in their practice have two options: either acquire additional training/education or do nothing. There are implications for both options; however, doing nothing is more detrimental to clients and the social work field. Social workers are ethically responsible to attend to the religious and spiritual dimension. They should understand a diverse cultural context and demonstrate competence when working with clients of all different religious and spiritual backgrounds. If students feels unprepared to address issues of religion and spirituality in their practice and do not take action towards preparing themselves, they may be performing a disservice by missing an important source of meaning and resource of support for clients. Furthermore, this lack of preparedness can lead to perpetuating misperceptions about religion and spirituality in the field and likely lead Smith graduates to inadvertently engage in microaggressions and micro-invalidations that religious and spiritual clients frequently experience in multiple areas of their life.

Comprehensiveness

While this study indicated that SCSSW students are generally dissatisfied and feel unprepared regarding issues of religion and spirituality in practice, results highlighted a low degree of inclusion of issues of religion and spirituality in (1) specific courses; (2) readings; and (3) class discussions at Smith College School for Social Work. As a whole, SCSSW students reported that the curriculum's inclusion of religion and spirituality was not comprehensive; and this lack of comprehensiveness is reflected in the above described patterns of dissatisfaction and unpreparedness when addressing issues of religion and spirituality in practice . It appears that instructors are insufficiently covering issues of religion and spirituality in their course content, readings, and classroom discussions, and that students would feel more satisfied and prepared if this focus within ongoing, required coursework was intensified. However, future research should explore satisfaction and preparedness rates of students who *are* receiving training on addressing religion and spirituality in practice to use as a comparison and clarify ongoing best practices.

Findings also suggested that feeling more favorable towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education was related to self-report ratings of less content on religious and spiritual issues being included in specific courses, readings, and class discussions at Smith College School for Social Work. The nature of the self-report highlights an important measurement issue. On one hand, students who value the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice and education may be best positioned to then assess the degree of inclusion of this content in their education. Alternatively, those who are invested in this content may be reporting rates that are biased based on their own preferences. However, this is unlikely the case as students' RRSP scores were unrelated to their personal level of involvement in religion and spirituality.

Year in Graduate School

Contrary to previous research, year in graduate school was not significantly related to attitudes toward religion and spirituality in social work practice. Students in their last year of graduate school did not demonstrate stronger beliefs that there is a role for religion and spirituality in social work practice compared to students in their first year or second year of graduate school. This suggests that at SSSW, academic developmental level does not impact overall attitudes towards the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice. Future research should identify if this trend is true within the SSSW cohorts across time as compared to other schools of social work.

Alternative Conceptions of Religious and Spiritual Factors

Lastly, this study collected exploratory data on Smith College MSW students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how they respond to information about "spirits." The majority of respondents (69%) indicated they have "worked with a client who reported seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost" in some manifestation as compared to a third (31%) who indicated they have not worked with such a client. This highlights that while the presence of "spirits" is often dismissed as superstition, this is an issue that can emerge as very real and possible during a clinical encounter. How students then conceptualize this phenomena is also valuable; over half (56.4%) felt that "spiritual or religious factors were as important, if not more important, than biological, psychological, or social factors in explaining the cause of a client's report of seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost" in some manifestation. About a third (36.4%) disagreed with the above statement and a small minority (7.3%) were "unsure." Rather than identifying some type of biological, psychological, or social cause to the experience (i.e.

visual hallucination originating from biological causes) the majority of students were open to the possibility of religious or spiritual factors, which may essentially indicate there are forces unknown at play. This finding challenges the Westernized notion of mental illness and the DSM 5 which is considered to be the most comprehensive and current resource for the diagnosis and classification of mental disorders. However, a growing body of empirical research has discovered that different populations attribute or link spiritual or religious beliefs to the etiology and treatment of mental illness. Furthermore, SCSSW students reported comfort in communicating to treatment teams about the possibility that spiritual or religious factors should be considered in explaining a client's report of seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost." Despite a reported lack in training and education regarding issues of religion and spirituality in practice, students are working with clients around these issues and are comfortable engaging in conversations around religion and spirituality with treatment teams. Where students derive this comfort is an area for future research. It is likely students are relying upon their personal involvement or knowledge with religion and spirituality when working with clients and treatment teams. However, the majority of students at the Smith College School for Social Work report being uninvolved in a religious or spiritual practice. Therefore, it would be essential to explore how students actually address issues of religion and spirituality in practice, if at all. Future research might examine the types of religious or spiritual interventions being used with clients and why. Being uninvolved in a religious or spiritual practice, while also feeling dissatisfied and unprepared from receiving training on religion and spirituality that is not comprehensive are major challenges that need to be overcome in order for religion and spirituality to be adequately addressed in practice.

Conclusions

In conclusion, social work practice continues to evolve as a culturally sensitive, helping profession as social work education attempts to address issues of content regarding religion and spirituality in their curriculum. As a whole, SCSSW students reported the curriculum on religion and spirituality was not comprehensive. Students reported feeling dissatisfied and unprepared to address issues of religion and spirituality in practice because they are not being provided this content in their schooling. This is troubling for a variety of reasons including the negative impact this can have on already marginalized populations. This study also demonstrated that students have worked with a client who reported seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or “ghost” in some manifestation. Although this experience is thought of by most in the mental health community as a hallucination (i.e., based in biological and physiological factors), for many practitioners, patients and communities, this experience is a spiritual or religious one. Since, SCSSW students are open to exploring religious or spiritual factors as the source of their client's experience and would be comfortable voicing these issues to treatment teams, SCSSW students could serve as important agents of systemic change if they are provided with training that helps them learn inclusive ways of thinking, learning, and teaching about spirituality and religion.

While factors related to religion and spirituality are increasingly being seen as relevant and appropriate, there continues to be a disconnect between social work practice and social work education. There is a need to bridge these two worlds by valuing the voices and experiences of students as well as the evidence that suggests students would feel more satisfied and prepared to address issues of religion and spirituality in practice if the curriculum on these issues was more comprehensive. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that different populations including graduate social work students attribute or link spiritual or religious beliefs to the etiology and

treatment of mental illness; a challenge to the dominant paradigm of how social workers understand mental health.

Interpretation of findings must take into account the study's limitations. These limitations primarily involve issues related to sampling and data collection methods. While Smith College School for Social Work is a co-ed graduate program, it has historically been an all-women's college. These gender differences were reflected in the sample. In addition, since the survey was administered online, respondents were limited to students who likely regularly utilize social media and school communication methods. Only students who utilize Facebook, Twitter, or the SCSSW home page had access to the recruitment message that notified students of the survey. In addition, the majority of respondents fell into a Judeo-Christian religious grouping that may impact their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences concerning alternative conceptions of religious and spiritual factors in their understanding of mental illness and how they respond to information about “spirits.”

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Appendix A: HSR Approval Letter

School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 30, 2015
Candice Light
Dear Candice,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mamta Dadlani, Research Advisor

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Candice Light, and I am a Smith College School for Social Work Masters Level student. I am conducting a study to explore factors that shape Smith students' attitudes concerning religion and spirituality in social work practice and examine how Smith College School for Social Work includes content on religion and spirituality in their curriculum in order to prepare students to address religion and spirituality in their social work practice. The data collected from this study will be used to complete my MSW thesis and dissemination presentation, and may possibly be used for publication. I have completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) on line training course prior to HSR approval. The certificate of completion is on file at the SSW.

To participate in this study, you must be a Smith College School for Social Work A'14, A'15, or A'16 student with experience either working or interning in the Social Work field. Participation will require approximately 10-15 minutes of your time to complete a brief, anonymous online survey. There are no foreseeable risks. This study is anonymous. I will not be collecting any information about your identity, IP address, or any other information that could link you to the study. All electronically stored data will be password protected and encrypted.

Your participation will build upon the existing literature on religion and spirituality in social work practice as well as provide new data on the attitudes and experiences of SCSSW students. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the study by exiting the survey at any time. You have the right not to answer any particular question. It is

important to note that, once the survey is completed, I will be unable to withdraw your answers due to the anonymous nature of the study. All research materials including analyses and consent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.

You have the right to ask questions about the study and have those questions answered by me before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, Candice Light, at clight@smith.edu. If you have any other concern about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Sincerely,

Candice Light

Smith College School for Social Work student

*By selecting the box that says "I Agree," you are indicating that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study and that you have read and understood the information posted above. It is recommended that you print the consent form for your own records.

*By selecting the "I disagree" box, you will be disqualified and exit the survey.

Appendix C

Table 1

Involvement in religious and spiritual practice

Item: I am involved in an organized religion or spiritual practice.

	Frequency	Percent
strongly disagree	12	20.0
disagree	18	30.0
neither disagree nor agree	8	13.3
agree	17	28.3
strongly agree	5	8.3
Total	60	100.0

Appendix D

Table 2

Satisfaction with content on religion/spirituality

Item: Rate your satisfaction with the amount of content on religion and spirituality in social work practice that has been included in your own graduate social work education at Smith College thus far.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
very unsatisfied	5	8.5
2	24	40.7
3	20	33.9
4	8	13.6
very satisfied	2	3.4
Total	59	100.0

Appendix E

Table 3

Preparedness

Item: I feel the graduate level training I received regarding religion and spirituality prepared me to begin to address religion and spirituality in my social work practice.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
strongly disagree	7	12.1
disagree	25	43.1
neither disagree nor agree	15	25.9
agree	8	13.8
strongly agree	3	5.2
Total	58	100.0

Appendix F

Table 4

Comprehensiveness of training on religion/spirituality

Item: In your social work education and training thus far, to what extent, on average, are issues of religion and spirituality included in classroom discussions?

	Frequency	Percent
almost never	17	29.3
2	29	50.0
3	9	15.5
always always	3	5.2
Total	58	100.0

Item: In your social work education and training thus far, to what extent, on average, are issues of religion and spirituality included in assigned readings?

	Frequency	Percent
almost never	19	32.8
2	29	50.0
3	6	10.3
almost always	4	6.9
Total	58	100.0

Item: In your social work education and training thus far, to what extent, on average, are issues of religion and spirituality included in written assignments?

	Frequency	Percent
almost never	26	44.8
2	27	46.6
3	3	5.2
almost always	2	3.4
Total	58	100.0

Appendix G

Table 5

Comfort discussing spiritual or religious explanations of symptoms

Item: I felt comfortable in communicating to the treatment team about the possibility that spiritual or religious factors should be considered in explaining a client's report of seeing, hearing, or experiencing a spirit or "ghost" in some manifestation.

	Frequency	Percent
strongly disagree	2	3.5
disagree	7	12.3
neither disagree nor agree	13	22.8
agree	26	45.6
strongly agree	9	15.8
Total	57	100.0
