2014

Spirituality, community and action : an exploration of Catholic sisters in social work

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how Catholic sisters who practice social work understand their experiences in both religious life and the field of social work. Sisters have made significant contributions to professional social services for centuries and have done so out of deep spiritual commitments; yet, modern sisters' experiences have not been examined by researchers as a source of knowledge about how spiritual belief and social work practice intersect and impact both individual growth and institutional action.

A total of 12 Catholic sisters who had worked in social work settings across the U.S. participated in semi-structured interviews for this study about meaning behind their choice of lifestyle and work, the motivations that sustained those choices, and finally, their understanding of any areas of reciprocal influence, overlap, or evolution in terms of their beliefs and behaviors as social workers and as sisters.

Noteworthy findings from this sample are as follows: (1) a "generative" spirituality motivated sisters' work for social justice alongside oppressed communities, (2) membership in religious community functioned as an embrace of "woman-centered" spirituality, (3) community structures buoyed and enhanced their social work practices and development as sisters, (4) spiritual beliefs and behaviors were sometimes renegotiated to better meet the needs of social justice as understood through social work experience

SPIRITUALITY, COMMUNITY AND ACTION:

AN EXPLORATION OF CATHOLIC SISTERS IN SOCIAL WORK

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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2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

First, thank you to the 12 sisters who generously shared their perspectives with me and whose examples of integrity, ingenuity, and courage I so deeply admire. Further, thanks to all sisters whose witness to spiritual commitments and service to the human community inspired this study.

I am grateful to my advisor, Dr. Dominique Moyse Steinberg for her warmth, guidance and astute editing throughout this writing process.

Thank you to Annette McDermott, SSJ; Connie Trainor, SSJ; Lucian Clark, CP; Maureen Broughan, SSJ; and Tricia Lothschutz for their contributions of mentorship and kindness, as well as essential guidance at all stages of the development and implementation of this project.

To Andrew, Brooke, Chanel, Molly and Rosaria, I carry our community with me always. To my Smith classmates and teachers, I am thrilled to have begun this journey of professional social work with you. To my family, thank you for your love. Finally, to Rachel, I am so grateful for your partnership.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This study explored how Catholic sisters who practice social work understand their experiences in both religious life and the field of social work. Sisters have contributed enormously in American religious and spiritual contexts as well as professional social services since their first arrival in the 18th century. Yet, modern sisters' experiences in either sphere have not been examined by researchers as a potential source of wisdom. Accordingly, the focus of this qualitative study was on gathering information from active sisters on the meaning behind their choice of lifestyle and work, the motivations that sustained those choices and, finally, their understanding of any areas of reciprocal influence, overlap, or evolution in terms of their beliefs and behaviors as social workers and as sisters. Sisters' decades of experience were considered rich source material for understanding one way in which spiritual belief and social work practice have intersected for them.

In recent years, many sisters have been vocal about how their social advocacy and services (often in the form of social work) are manifestations of their collective commitment to a spirituality that emphasizes justice and human dignity (Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, sisters have articulated ways in which their work with oppressed and marginalized peoples informs their belief and behavior as sisters (Campbell, 2014). This is in keeping with historical accounts that document how early American sisters also articulated their spirituality and mission in response to the practical needs and social inequalities of their times (Wittberg, 2006).

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While sisters' public activism today suggests that they connect their formal spiritual and/or religious identities and their professional practice of social work (Leadership Conference of Women Religious [LCWR], 2009) and have done so for centuries (Anderson, 2000), research-based literature focusing on the experience of sisters is limited. For this reason, the theological underpinnings of the spiritual beliefs that many sisters' articulate, along with accounts of sisters' experience in social work and in their life in community, will all be explored as key contexts that frame sisters' perspectives. The literature will also demonstrate how sisters who perform social work both shape and are shaped by the larger religious and social work institutions of which they are a part, the sociocultural milieu of their era, and their lifelong commitments to religious community. In addition, the case for the importance of studying sisters' modern experiences in the field of social work is built. Much stands to be gained from qualitative research on the topic of adult spiritual and religious development in terms of supporting social work theory, practice (Seinrich, 2013) and education (Tisdell, 2002). Sisters provide one location in which to explore the intersection of spiritual belief and social work and its impact on individuals and groups. The exploration of these contexts will form the basis of the literature review to be included in the following chapter (Chapter II).

Chapter III next details the specific research question and describes the methods used to carry out this study. A total of 12 Catholic sisters who had worked in social work settings across the United States participated in semi-structured interviews with this researcher about their formal spiritual and religious identities and their professional practice as social workers, with special attention to areas of commonality, difference, meaning, and motivation. For the purposes of this study, sisters were defined by their membership in a religious community of Catholic women, known as an order or congregation and which requires lifetime vows to dedicate

members to the particular mission or service of the community. Social work practice experience was defined broadly within guidelines suggested by the National Association of Social Workers (2009).

Chapter IV includes the wealth of personal and professional experience shared in the data collection process and offers the most noteworthy findings of the study, compiled into the four major themes. First, sisters spoke of a "generative" spirituality that motivated their work alongside oppressed communities, often in the form of professional social work. Secondly, sisters' responses dovetailed around their decision to become a member of a religious community as an embrace of "woman-centered" spirituality. Third, they spoke about community support as a central aspect of being a sister that buoyed and enhanced their social work. Finally, participants elaborated a relationship of reciprocal influence between their awareness of oppression and their actions in renegotiating their spirituality into a more inclusive and egalitarian framework.

Finally, Chapter V attempts to make meaning of the findings and tie this new piece of research into existing knowledge. In particular, findings were discussed in terms of implications for our understanding of spirituality and qualities of spirituality that support social work practice and professional development. Findings were also discussed in terms of the impact of communities organized around religion and spirituality on collective action and individual growth. Ultimately, findings were discussed in relationship to sisters' beliefs and behaviors and their evolving role in the Catholic Church, in the spirit of "the alternative vision that can be provided by explicit inclusion of woman's presence and perspective [as sisters]" (Thompson, 1991, p. 137).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Overview

This investigation represents an attempt to add detail and richer complexity to conceptualizations of spiritual and religious identities and the intersection of those identities with professional social work in the context of a particular group of individuals: Roman Catholic sisters practicing social work in the United States. This literature review examines current and historical sources for perspectives on why and how sisters operate in the field of social work. The review also examines how broad sociocultural and theological transformations of the last century alongside experiences in the work of social justice and social services have affected women who are both sisters and social workers as they have understood and lived out their roles and commitments. Commonalities between the values, activities and goals of social work and Catholic women's religious life are explored in this review, as are, in equal measure, conflicts and distinctions between the two spheres.

The case for the importance of studying sisters' modern experiences in the field of social work in particular is built throughout this review, especially in light of sisters' social activism on both in the American public sector and within the Church community. It attempts to demonstrate what can be gained by qualitative research on the topic of adult spiritual and/or religious practices in terms of supporting social work theory, practice and education. Furthermore, it demonstrates how focusing on sisters' particular experiences may contribute to the profession of

social work as a whole in its understanding of spirituality and religion, collective values and structural change.

Some Clarifications on Terminology and Point of View

Colloquially, the terms sister and nun are widely recognizable and used interchangeably. Women religious is also an accepted label. However, sister is the formal designation for communities of women religious who are members of active congregations, that is, they work actively in some type of public ministry. On the other hand, nuns are considered contemplative and limit their contact with the outside world and primarily focus on prayer. Women religious who do social work, therefore, are sisters exclusively and thus *sister(s)* is the term used for this study. Furthermore, congregation and order are both terms that signify any of a variety of the communities of women religious of which sisters are a part. These terms also have historical differences but - for the sake of simplicity and to conform to vernacular understanding, they are used interchangeably or substituted with the term religious community in the study.

Both congregations and orders also have *charisms*, a word that refers to a particular priority or spirit of each community that is reflected in their spiritual and ministerial focus. The charism guides a community's intentions and actions and is often identified and developed by the person who established the community and then maintained by future members as part of what distinguishes them from other communities (Thompson, 1991). It is often in the charism that both the active functions and spiritual intentions of these religious communities are intertwined (Schneiders, 2013).

In the United States, there are two leadership bodies that represent the collective voices of sisters but that signify somewhat different approaches to and conceptualizations of vowed, religious life for Catholic women. The Leadership Council for Women Religious (LCWR) was

initiated at the request of the Vatican in 1956 (and at that time known by a different name) to be a representative structure dedicated to fostering communication between sisters and that was accountable to the Vatican. The LCWR has evolved over the last six decades as an organization that intentionally and creatively supports the growth and leadership of its members (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992) and represents approximately 80% of women religious in the United States today (Leadership Conference of Women Religious [LCWR], 2014). The remaining 20% of American sisters are represented by the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR). This second leadership body was established in 1992, after long-standing disagreements with the LCWR, in order to prioritize more conservative interpretations of obedience and tradition in their practice of sisterhood (Schneiders, 2013). In addition, members of communities represented by the CMSWR typically wear the habit, a formal style of dress, while members of the LCWR dress in ways that reflect their context and are therefore not identifiable by uniform clothing.

The evidence presented in the literature review primarily reflects the perspectives of the LCWR both because of the direct affiliation of sisters whose work is cited and because of the theoretical orientations of other sources. This distinction is relevant to note, as it conveys the reality that differences do exist within sisters in the U.S and the Church as a whole. For readers with specific knowledge of the Catholic Church, this focus on the LCWR implies particular frameworks and priorities in this thesis.

Ultimately, it is noteworthy that, while women religious have a recognized position that is different from lay people in the Church, they are not ordained as priests and therefore "do not participate in the formal government structure of the Church and have only a limited voice in its official policies" (Wittberg, 1994, p. 43). In the Catholic Church, authority in leadership decisions and in theological truths is reserved for the ordained, a privilege for which only men

are eligible. The Church and sisters' prescribed role in the Church therefore reflect the strictures of patriarchy that have influenced organized religion in the West for centuries (Thompson, 1991). Despite these prescriptions, however, there are myriad women who have and continue to challenge and expand their roles in the Church and in other spheres. Sisters are one such group of women.

Understanding the Context of American Catholic Sisters in Social Work

Historical involvement in social work: a brief overview of 'what' and 'why?' When Catholic sisters began arriving in the United States alongside the waves of largely poor Catholic immigrants from Europe in the 19th century, they brought with them the traditions that "enshrined active service – teaching, nursing, caring for the poor – on an equal plane with spiritual exercises" (Wittberg, 2006, p. 6). The charism of many American communities of sisters hinged their relationship with God on their service to God's people (Wittberg, 2006).

In contrast to the priorities of contemplative religious persons of earlier eras who had focused primarily on holiness achieved through personal purification (Grell, 1997), sisters who perform some kind of active service make up more than 95 percent of women in religious life in the U.S. today (Wittberg, 1994). Active sisters not only are the type of women religious most familiar to American society because of their numbers but also because they have made substantial contributions through their work running thousands of schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other social agencies.

For these original American sisters, as well as for those in communities founded on U.S. soil later on, active service has been a primary impetus for their existence (Hogan, 1996). Frequently, Catholic women would see an unmet need and take the initiative to form a religious community dedicated to meeting that need. In other cases, local religious leaders would request

the founding or placement of a community of sisters to serve an area in a particular capacity. Sisters capitalized on their exclusion from the officially sanctioned male leadership of the Church by doing service work that brought them into consistent and meaningful contact with people of all faiths (Thompson, 1991). In fact, their ministries "tended to evolve not from the demands of clerics or other male leaders, but primarily from their own perceptions and initiatives. For sisters […] gender-based exclusion from official ecclesial structures […] did not act as deterrents to participation but led rather to the development of independent mechanisms and avenues of service" (Thompson, p. 137).

The centrality of active service to the mission and purpose of Catholic sisters in this historical period cannot be understated. Although they were identifiable as representatives of institutionalized religion and institutional social services, they were as deeply - and perhaps equally - connected to grassroots and community-based social services (Wittberg, 2006). Their sense of spirituality and mission was articulated in response to the specific and evolving context of their era. Sisters were compelled to act by the needs that they saw in their ongoing direct experience with the world, and this context informed their sense of mission and purpose. As Wittberg explains:

> While many of these groups could cite official theological or scriptural bases for their initial identities, their early years were also shaped by the schools, hospitals, and social work agencies which they had been founded to staff and maintain. Each group's identity and raison d'etre, therefore, were strongly influenced by these institutions […] (2006, p. 13).

That the structure and function of sisterhood in this historical context was derived from practical needs of the times is perhaps less intuitively connected to our understanding of religious

life but certainly no less formative for sisters themselves. Entire communities were dedicated to addressing the social inequalities of the newly industrializing world. For example, consider that one congregation alone, the Sisters of Mercy, operated an employment service for immigrant women in New York City that placed nearly 17,000 women in jobs in the 1850s alone (Wittberg, 2006). Throughout the 19th century, a period that saw the establishment or arrival of many religious communities, sisters met the needs of masses of the disenfranchised with such grandness of scale that their efforts became some of the first social service institutions (Hogan, 1996).

While Protestant women are most often credited with the founding of the profession of social work (Day & Schiele, 2012; Faver, 1987), it is more accurate to say that women of all denominations were involved in the development of the field of social work as a recognized entity during the early reformer and settlement house movements (Anderson, 2000; Wittberg, 2006). Catholic sisters even drew explicit parallels between the religious life and social work. For example, in the early 1900s one sister who was largely responsible for the growth of Catholic Charities in the city of Cincinnati, Ohio, remarked that a colleague "ought be a religious [sister], or at least, a trained social worker" (Anderson, p. 79).

It is noteworthy that sisters were able to persist in the field in leadership positions even after interloping male counterparts changed/undermined the autonomy of Protestant women. Sisters were free to commit their energies to their work independent of family obligations (a privilege afforded to few other women of that era) and attained levels of education that stemmed the loss of Catholic female leadership, at least to a certain degree (Thompson, 1991). Both Catholic and Protestant women were ultimately marginalized from the very religious organizations they helped to found, however, as the field succumbed to "the emerging ethos of

business," and as men replaced women as board members, executives, and highest ranking professionals (Anderson, p. 74).

In summary, sisters can be found in the literature documenting their contributions to institution building in the arena of social services in the U.S. Their work reveals their response to the needs of their times; responses that are culturally salient but that also reflect a "certain element of genuine originality and of special initiative for the spiritual life of the church" that is encapsulated in their charism (Sacred Congregation for Religious, 1978, Chapter III, Section 12, para. 1). From sociological standpoint, it is important to note how sisters' work fit in a very practical sense within the context of the needs of the Church and larger American society. Sisters' historical actions have laid the foundation for their involvement in social services today and for their highly credible style of leadership based on examples of commitment and initiative rather than on hierarchically defined religious status or authority.

Current involvement in social work: a complex picture. The nature of active social service ministries undertaken by sisters today is somewhat different from that of their predecessors in both practical function (e.g. the kinds of work sisters do and their approach to that work) and philosophy (e.g. ideological rationale and motivation). The field of social work as a whole has secularized over the past century and a half, with settlement houses originally run by religious charity workers evolving into social service agencies administrated by professionals and clinical social work aligning itself with the field of psychology to eschew all things religious or spiritual (Faver, 1987). That this secular evolution is the foundation of social work's status as a profession today is a given (Hill & Pargament, 2008). Social work can more effectively serve individuals from all faith backgrounds by not privileging one particular form of religious or spiritual expression (Gray, 2008). Furthermore, adherence to scientific principles and empirical

research legitimizes and validates the work in the context of research-oriented academic and professional culture (Coon, 2002).

Sisters who practice social work today have adjusted according and engage professionally – not as religious missionaries – but according to the same ethical standards and licensing requirements as any other professional. Sisters who work in social service continue to do so in ways that reflect a needs-driven assessment of their socio-cultural context and therefore are widely recognized for their creative methods and ability to adapt to meet pressing needs (Briggs, 2006; Schneiders, 2013). Sisters are less likely to live in convents and more likely to live independently or in groups of two or three while working in professional roles where they receive salaries (Wittberg, 2006). Sisters identify their involvement in a great range of social service work (NETWORK, 2014), much of which coincides with the range suggested by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) as falling within the bounds of professional practice, from "helping people obtain tangible services; counseling and psychotherapy with individual, families and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes" (NASW, 2013).

However, there are no comprehensive statistics documenting what percentage of today's sisters work in social work and what specifically they do in the field as compared to those who are retired or those who work in other fields. The most complete data about their work priorities were collected in a recurring fashion over the period of 1967 to 1980 (Neal, 1984). A combination of random sampling and full-population reports yielded tens of thousands of detailed responses from nearly 160,000 sisters contacted, a sample that provided more than 70% percent return on all surveys distributed. Their direct responses to these questionnaires demonstrated that they anticipated remaining "deeply involved in the works of education, health,

and welfare […] and other direct service to the suffering and the needy [both] as congregational commitments and as supports to the choices of individual sisters." In fact, sisters have already greatly "increased their commitment to this teaching [on solidarity with the poor] over the past twenty years" (Neal, 1991, p. 118).

Documents and data from individual congregations and other public initiatives can be examined to understand more about Sisters' specific commitment to social work. The website of the Sisters of Social Service, a congregation founded in Los Angeles in 1926, is a particularly good example of the type and variety of social work in which these women are involved, even beyond the fact that the name of their congregation makes an explicit connection between their status as Sisters and their social service work. Their website lists work throughout the U.S. in "centers for homeless teens and marginalized women; parenting education; quality, affordable housing; foster care for infants in crisis; work cooperatives for women; meals and companionship for the elderly; neighborhood centers for low-income families; parish social work; community organizing; and addictions treatment […]," among others. This particular congregation's emphasis on a spiritual framework that generates and sustains collaborative models of service is summarized in their mandate, "to be pioneers for a better world, working for social reform, not through decrees imposed by power but through renewal of the spirit from within" (Sisters of Social Service, 2014).

Despite the increased variety in modality and focus evident in sisters' social work, their involvement in the field today is significantly affected by the fact there are far fewer of them: 51,247 in the U.S. today in comparison to 179,954 in 1965 (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2014). Decreases in membership have meant decreases in funding and manpower necessary to maintain the service institutions that sisters historically established and ran and

which, in turn, contributed to Sisters' sense of identity and purpose. Decreases have also meant that leadership at the highest level and provision of services have both transitioned to lay persons in many institutions because of practical constraints on Sisters' time and financial resources (Wittberg, 2006).

These aforementioned changes in age demographics of sisters and the milieu of professional social work, in conjunction with the changing roles of women in all American society, have meant that Sisters' social service work demonstrates greater variety in type of service yet less focus on traditional, institutional Church structures (Wittberg, 2006). Some sisters reflect that, as a whole, women religious in the United States are offering their perspectives in political, economic and religious spheres in ways that reflect their own concientization and maturation processes as women, as members of their religious communities and as members of the global, human community (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992). Part of what the LCWR has been a proponent of within the Church itself is the necessity of a multitude of voices in dialogue (Sanders, 2013). The growth processes exhibited in sisters' personal lives, collective leadership structures and their work could be considered to reflect the reality that there are both spiritual and political aspects of social transformation (Russell, 1993, p. 127)

Still the centrality of active service to sisters' sense of purpose and spirituality persists. First, the alignment between religious beliefs and the fight for social justice are clear in the teachings of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. For example, the Council's 1965 statement on *The Church in the Modern World (Guadium et spes)* consistently advocates the same values that social work cites as its organizing principles: "To satisfy the demands of justice and equity, strenuous efforts must be made […] to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist and in many cases are growing and which are

connected with individual and social discrimination" (Paul VI, para. 66). Further, changes to the structure of religious life or type of work undertaken by women religious reflect a renewal of religious communities' founding commitment to work in the service of social justice (Johnson, 2013). As one sister who participated in a focus group on the meaning of her social service work, "[it is] a living example of our mission and vision statements. It is the place where we put our words into actions, our lives on the line" (Wittberg, 2006, p. 259). Today, sisters continue to articulate their undertakings in service and other missions in response to the specific context of the modern world just as the early American sisters of the 19th century were compelled to act by the needs that they saw at that time.

Evolving Frameworks for Belief and Behavior: Church, Service Work, and Community

The underpinnings of the spiritual beliefs that many sisters embody through their service and works for social justice are extensive. In this review, the teachings of the Catholic Church, the experience of social service work itself and the experience of living and working as members of vowed, religious communities will be explored as key contexts that have framed and supported the evolution of many contemporary sisters in their beliefs and behaviors.

Church and theological frameworks. Readers can obtain more comprehensive theological background through other sources, many of which are written by sisters themselves. For example, Sandra Schneiders, a member of the IHM community, has authored a multi-volume exploration of contemporary religious life, meaning and motivation in religious community (2000; 2001; 2013). Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, explores conceptions of God through global and feminist lenses (2002; 2007) and has been cited as the preeminent feminist theologian in the Church today (Ryan, 2011). Marie Augusta Neal, SNDden, (1970; 1971; 1984) provides empirical analysis of the changing spiritual beliefs and attitudes among Catholic sisters in

relationship to the theological and institutional advances of the Church before and after the time of the Second Vatican Council.

The brief history that follows now was originally compiled by Neal in an article exploring the use of the power of religion to advance the cause of social justice (1984). Social justice was first defined as a human right and a priority of the Catholic Church starting in the thirteenth century: Thomas Aquinas states in the *Summa Theologica* (1947) that "in cases of need all things are common property, so that there would seem to be no sin in taking another's property, for need has made it common." Furthermore, as Neal elaborates:

This thesis [of social justice] was reactivated in the Second Vatican Council in the document entitled *A Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965). Here it is stated that "if one is in extreme necessity, he has the right to procure for himself what he needs our of the riches of others" (Article 69). Other church documents extend this right to whole peoples. The encyclical entitled *The Development of Peoples* (1967), Pope Paul VI's letter *Call to Action* (1971), and the Bishops synod document, *Justice in the World* (1971), all provide church sanction for liberation movements for third world people's throwing off the yoke of colonialism and imperialism (1984, p. 334).

In addition to prioritization of social justice, sisters' spiritual beliefs followed the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on God as located "in the world and acting through people" rather than "remote and outside the world and acting over people" (Neal, 1984, p. 330). This humanization of God meant that believers are challenged to listen and respond to the needs and values of other persons, value the diversity inherent in human existence, to extend "services rather than command as the stance of those in authority […] acting to make just the social conditions of our times" (Neal, 1970, p. 13). Neal's own work in multi-decade studies of tens of

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thousands of sisters demonstrates that sisters have responded to the social teachings of the church by "developing a consensus and solidarity on the primacy of the Church's identification with the poor. Instruction provided by the sisters supports a more equitable distribution of wealth. Evidence indicates that this social policy is based on a gospel commitment" (1991, p. 113).

Sourcing service work experience for spiritual wisdom. Today, sisters' spirituality continues to be characterized as social justice oriented, humanistic and aimed toward "questioning of established power, and an uncovering of human pain and unmet need. It challenges structures that exclude some and benefit others" (Farrell, 2012, Section 3, para. 2). Furthermore, emphasis is placed on a spirituality that generates and sustains collaborative models of service. As a recent president of the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) expressed, this spiritual framework is an approach to service that is both contemplative and active and, essentially, done in religious community:

> While still providing direct service to current needs, they [sisters] attempt to raise the consciousness of those they educated and others who are now in positions of power to look at the systemic causes of poverty, human trafficking, racism, and the plight of current immigrants. What distinguishes them [sisters] from a myriad of social-service providers, however, is their quest for God. This is why they exist. This contemplative presence distinguishes their work; that they consistently do what they do with others, in communion with others, marks how they do their work (Mock, 2013, Epilogue, para. 7).

As in the quote above, recent research substantiates that individual sisters connect the meaning of their spirituality to their service work and their membership in religious community. Focus groups on the subject found that engaging in direct service was the top priority for many in their initial decision to become women religious (Wittberg, 2006). Further, many sisters were

unable to distinguish their motivation to be a sister from their motivation to do social work. The majority of participants characterized their social work as a natural outgrowth of their religious and spiritual priorities and, furthermore, that the communal work sustained and nourished those religious commitments (Wittberg, 2006). In the public sphere, many are taking action on behalf of social justice and voicing their support for oppressed populations in a way that aligns closely to the priorities and behaviors of the field of professional social work. Many individual sisters and even whole communities have spoken about social justice issues in American society as a whole, from protesting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the XL Pipeline, to the need for immigration reform and raising the minimum wage (Campbell, 2014; Dellinger, 2013) and for this type of advocacy and work they have earned recognition among Catholics and non-Catholics alike (Briggs, 2006; Winerip, 2012).

The relationship between sisters' spirituality and their involvement in social work seems to extend beyond the cause-and-effect dynamic described in preceding paragraphs, however, in which sisters are motivated to work for justice based on the institutional and theological guidance of the Church. In fact, many statements and actions made by sisters suggest that the relationship is reciprocal: their experiences in working for social justice (often performing social work roles and duties) in turn informs their religious and spiritual perspectives. In other words, their encounter with human diversity and the human condition in serving marginalized and oppressed people – an encounter initially motivated by the theological spirit of Vatican II - has actually served as an opportunity to challenge any spiritual frameworks that do not support human diversity and the challenges of the human condition and to renegotiate those spiritual beliefs. In fact, informed by their experiences alongside and in solidarity with the people they

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serve, many sisters have chosen to develop new or alternative perspectives and approaches to their religious and spiritual beliefs.

To get a clearer picture of this reciprocal dynamic it is helpful to look at response to a recent public stance taken by the Leadership Council for Women Religious (LCWR), the organization comprised of the leaders of the majority of congregations of Catholic Sisters in the U.S. In 2010, the LCWR spoke publicly on their support for Affordable Care Act (ACA), an action that placed Sisters in direct contradiction with sanctioned Church leadership structures, notably the U.S. Conference for Catholic Bishops, because the bill presented concerns about funding for contraception (LCWR, 2009). Sisters justified their public decision on the grounds that the good to be achieved from the passage of the bill was evident through their work with and allegiance to marginalized populations. As the letter written by the LCWR stated it:

> We have witnessed firsthand the impact of our national health care crisis, particularly its impact on women, children and people who are poor. We see the toll on families who have delayed seeking care due to a lack of health insurance coverage or lack of funds with which to pay high deductibles and co-pays. We have counseled and prayed with men, women and children who have been denied health care coverage by insurance companies. We have witnessed early and avoidable deaths because of delayed medical treatment [...]We urge you to vote "yes" for life by voting yes for health care reform (2009).

Clearly, leadership in a spiritual capacity comes to the fore in this example because sisters are claiming their collective identity and using their representative leadership to make this advocacy statement. Furthermore, this spiritual leadership is informed by the experience they cite in social services. The organizing, activism, and advocacy so central to the profession of

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social work was leveraged alongside their religious credentials to not only inform the United States Congress of the implications of the ACA but also to demonstrate that sisters are informed by their service experiences. In other words, their encounter with human diversity and the human condition has become an opportunity for sisters to challenge some of aspects of Catholic spirituality that do not support human diversity and, further, to offer more complex or renegotiated perspectives in response to those encounters.

This reciprocal dynamic, illustrating the power of experience to inform spirituality, has been explored above but is as of yet unsubstantiated in empirical research. However, sisters' citing their own experience as a source of power in a spiritual or theological sense dovetails with characterizations of other oppressed or marginalized groups as they attempt to renegotiate spiritual or religious perspectives and claim their own power, "the search for new symbols of God is an active part of their practice of religion and their pursuit of justice" (Neal, 1984, p. 335). In short, sisters listen to and heed "the signs of the times" (Paul IV, par. 4) - a phrase meant to convey the needs of contemporary humanity – a central mandate since the Second Vatican Council (Selling, 2002); and in doing so, they have, interestingly enough, begun to listen to their own voices as well.

Membership in religious community informs belief and behavior. It worth noting that as a particular group within the Church, sisters have undergone a consciousness change or conscientization process that was supported and institutionalized by their collective leadership (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992). As all American women renegotiated - or perhaps for the first time actively negotiated - their relationship to hegemonic structures and ideologies in light of movements for women's liberation, civil rights, anti-colonialism, and economic justice for the poor, so too did sisters respond to these issues and begin to renegotiate in radical ways, seeking

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to change their participation both within the institution of religious life and in society as a whole. This affected the direction their collective leadership structures took, the development of the Sister Formation Conference (SFC) being a noteworthy example. In brief, the SFC was formed through the initiative of several superiors of communities of women religious starting in the 1950s and was responsible for developing and implementing the education plans for young sisters to obtain undergraduate and graduate degrees and for all sisters to begin to communicate effectively across different communities and learn from each other. It was through the network of the SFC and subsequent initiatives that sisters were able to engage in new kinds of work in community and social work settings and share knowledge about their experiences (Quiñonez & Turner).

Sisters today remain among the most highly educated groups of American women ever (Wittberg, 2006). This is a remarkable achievement when comparing their education levels to that of their female peers and is made even more unique when considering that these women were often educated at colleges established and run by their all-female communities (Neal, 1991). Sisters' collective leadership structures both within individual communities and national conferences like the LCWR and the (now defunct) SFC can be seen as providing the institutional supports necessary to have educated and sustained the cohort of the 50,000 American Catholic sisters alive today. Sisters have taken initiative to empower and support members in professional and personal development and to foster the conscientization of sisters to global perspectives on poverty, liberation theology, racism, and patriarchy (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992). Sisters and their representatives have spoken about a sense of coming of age in their leadership role and have used their collective agency for the growth of members and of their mission (Mock, 2013; Johnson, 2013).

Encountering resistance: criticism of sisters. Reactions to the idea that sisters'

spirituality may be informed by experiences outside of official tradition or hierarchically

approved theology and leadership has prompted consequences for sisters within the microcosm

of the Catholic Church, a reaction that suggests that control of power is at stake (Neal, 1984).

Sisters have found that their advocacy for everything from health care reform to women's rights

to the place of LGBT people within the Church places them at odds with the official teachings of

the hierarchy - a hierarchy explicitly patriarchal and heterosexist. In fact, at the time of this

writing, American sisters have been subjected to an investigation initiated by the Vatican (the

leadership structure of the global Catholic Church) for the prevalence of "radical feminist

themes" and for doctrinal errors considered "grave and a matter of serious concern," by that

Church, and especially for their failure to prioritize anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality

teachings (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2012, p. 2-3).

Critics of the sisters within the Catholic hierarchy have also said their vocal social justice

advocacy reflects a lack of role clarity and fear that sisters' work involvement would usurp the

primacy of their religious identities, especially as they become more educated and advanced in

professional status (Nygren & Ukeritis, 1993). Their commitment to social justice has also been

condemned and/or co-opted in political ways by secular critics. For example, after the 1980 rape

and murder of three sisters and one lay Catholic woman by El Salvador's national guard, the

women were accused by the U.S. Secretary of State as being "gun-runners" and by the U.S.

representative to the United Nations as "subversives" despite the women's well-documented

commitment to social service and Church work (Neal, 1984, p. 330). The murder of many

dozens of Catholic religious and lay workers by a Salvadoran government financed by the U.S.

government was excused by characterizing these religious as Communists (LeoGrande, 2000).

While extreme, these examples effectively demonstrate how sisters' on-going alignment with the poor will inherently be politicized in a capitalist global structure where power distributes along class lines (Neal, 1984). Their work for other marginalized groups also threatens the status quo and thus can be seen to account for some of the censure and criticism they receive.

The underpinnings of the spiritual beliefs that many sisters speak about and embody through their service and works toward social justice are extensive and include the teachings of the Catholic Church, the experience of social service work itself, and the experience of living and working as members of vowed religious communities. Clearly, these experiences have contributed to their evolving perspectives and provided the context in which they could experience such an evolution in perspectives on religion and spirituality that seemingly puts them at odds with the official leaders of their faith. Sisters have taken seriously the alignment articulated by Church leadership between religious and spiritual beliefs and the fight for social justice (Johnson, 2013), and furthermore have paid attention to the wisdom gained in that fight. To anyone familiar with Catholic theology, this blend of social justice and spirituality may be familiar; yet, it is still surprising when seen in light of the Church's many well-known public teachings generally interpreted as condemnatory, discriminatory, and exclusionary. For this reason, key contexts that have framed and supported the evolution of many contemporary sisters in their beliefs and behaviors have been explored above.

Spirituality and the Modern Social Worker: Catholic Sisters as Examples of Integration

The field of social work as a secular profession is evidencing renewed interest in how spirituality and religion relate to modern social work education and practice (Gray, 2006; Senreich, 2013). Given sisters' near 300 years of experience providing services in the US, they have gathered an understanding of how intersectional - and at times competing - spiritual and

religious roles might inform the practice of social work. Furthermore, this particular community of women may provide rich data to the field of social work in light of their activism in the U.S. and in the Catholic Church and the ways in which their organizational structures support that activism.

There is, unfortunately, a scarcity of research on how spirituality and/or religious beliefs motivate and inform work, either for social justice in general or within the confines of the field of social work (Jacobs, 2010; Tisdell, 2002), especially given their substantial commonality of interest in the human condition. However, the research that does exist does demonstrate that social work practitioners as a whole do not disentangle private religion and/or spirituality from their work in their choice of intervention or clinical conceptualizations (Bilgrave & Deluty, 2002; Jacobs, 2010). Spirituality and religion also influence practitioners in their personal exercises in meaning-making (Smith & Orlinsky, 2004). In fact, religious and/or spiritual beliefs necessitate involvement in social justice work for many and are therefore inherently connected (Tisdell, 2002). Although social justice certainly covers a broader scope of activities than those within the bounds of social work, the ideas and values conveyed by spirituality and/or religion are often intimately connected to a person's commitment to social justice and therefore activities that form the basis of social work (Daloz, Keen, Keen & Parks, 1996; Freire, 1970, 1997).

Currently, large gaps in our understanding of how spirituality changes over time, especially in light of sociocultural location and experience, have been identified (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Tisdell, 1999). Some studies do suggest that adults renegotiate their beliefs in light of personal development and maturation experiences (Tisdell, 2002; Wuthnow, 1999). Social work experience as a source of knowing about personal spirituality and/or religion, therefore, merits exploration. It is in this same vein that examining Catholic sisters' current work

is relevant in order to better understand how social service can constitute the source of and the renegotiation of religious and/or spiritual beliefs and behaviors.

This review of sisters' own evolution alongside their professional work and other sociocultural forces has begun to illustrate how they understand the relationship between personal spiritual frameworks and their professional work. Clearly, what they are doing and saying in the public arena speaks to their sense of purpose. As explored in the examples above, many of these women have clearly identified a spiritual framework that motivates social justice work, a framework based both on the theological evolution in their Church and on their collective education and experience with marginalized and oppressed groups. Shifts in their own institutions that enabled their work have prompted sisters to renegotiate their spiritual and religious ways or inform them in ways that appear more inclusive and based on the needs of the communities they serve. Although unverified by research on sisters specifically, this idea of a renegotiated spirituality falls in line with qualitative research on the spiritual development of adults generally (Wuthnow, 1999) and more specifically, on adult women (Tisdell, 2002), suggesting that maturation over time often leads spirituality that is more inclusive, respectful of diversity, and action-oriented.

Yet, more information from sisters is needed to truly understand the intersection between social work and religious commitment. This study, therefore, sought to explore how Catholic sisters who are both social work professionals and religious professionals understand their experiences and view themselves in these two spheres. Further, the study asked if sisters' dual roles in social work and religious life influence each other or overlap, as current public reports and other sources explored in this review of the related literature seem to suggest. Thus, this study was not one of religion and spirituality as it affects clinical practice but rather of religion

and spirituality in the collective experience and personal lives of a subgroup of practitioners with emphasis less on the specific content of Catholic belief systems and more on the frameworks that facilitate the processes of belief and behavior in the experience of sisters.

Ultimately, what sisters say about themselves is the most coherent source of knowing about their experiences and growth processes in the realms of social work and spirituality, although little has been written to date. This research hoped to address, in a small way, the "serious neglect of the roles and contributions of women [though] women play various roles that are essential parts of what religion has always been all about in the American context" (Thompson, 1991, p. 137).

Chapter III

Method

Research Purpose and Question

Research in the field of social work that addresses any aspect of the experiences of Catholic sisters is near nonexistent; however, the fact that these women make significant contributions to the field today and have done so in large numbers since its establishment is demonstrated in the literature reviewed in the previous chapter (Anderson, 2000; Wittberg, 2006). In addition, research suggests that social work undertaken by sisters is an expression of religious and/or spiritual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as well as the catalyst for renegotiating those religious and/or spiritual beliefs (Campbell, 2014; Sanders, 2014). When taken in light of calls from social work clinicians and researchers to conceptualize spirituality in a way that is inclusive (Senreich, 2013) and enriching to social work theory, practice and education (Moss, 2012) as well as to the understanding of adult development (Tisdell, 2002), the value of looking at the particular complexities of sisters practicing social work in the United States becomes clear.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore how Catholic sisters who work in social work understand their experiences and view themselves in both the spheres of social work practice and their religious and/or spiritual life. Further, the study asked if their dual roles in social work and religious life influence each other or overlap and what, if any, implications arise for the field of social work.

Research Method and Design

Keeping both this research framework and study question in mind, the methods chosen for this project were qualitative, inductive, and exploratory in nature. Here, qualitative research refers to the use of semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Babbie, 2010) with 12 participants. The process of induction means that data collection and analysis preceded the development of a theory to describe and/or explain the results of those interviews. Finally, because the emphasis of the study was on exploration, a certain flexibility and openness during the actual interviews and subsequent analysis was necessary.

Data Collection

Data were gathered in semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 and 105 minutes. The results of this data collection process are presented in the next chapter (Chapter IV). Interviews were conducted face-to-face for three participants and due to geographical distance or timing constraints, over the telephone for the other nine participants. In-person interview location was determined on participant preference and/or feasibility. Seven interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The remaining five interviews were transcribed by this researcher at the time of the interview. This in-vivo transcription occurred if participants preferred not to be audio recorded (two cases) or if recording equipment malfunctioned (three cases).

A number of interview questions were prepared ahead of time by this researcher and were used to guide the interview in a semi-structured way (see Appendix A for the interview schedule). Some demographic data about the participants was also collected. Open-ended interview questions clustered around the following areas (1) religious life as a Sister, such as why did she join initially and why has she stayed (2) social work experience, including examples of current

and past roles as well as motivation to be in the field, (3) perspective on any aspects of mutuality or reciprocal influence between a formal spiritual and/or religious identity and the professional practice of social work, such as commonalities or differences between the two roles, and (4) perspective on how experiences in religious life might speak to the practice of social work. Finally, when appropriate, the researcher asked follow-up questions to gain more understanding or clarity in the participants' responses. Typically, follow-up questions probed for more details on process ("how, exactly?") or content ("what, specifically?") of a participant's response.

To protect the confidentiality of study participants, all identifying information obtained through the data collection process described above was disguised in the final report by describing the subject pool in the aggregate and by using pseudonyms for individual quotations. Further, Informed Consent forms, interview notes, and audio recordings have been protected according to Human Subjects Review guidelines established by the Smith College School for Social Work (http://smith.edu/ssw/acad_msw_hsr.php).

Data Analysis

Demographic data were noted and calculated in aggregate form as needed to portray characteristics of participants and limitations of the study sample. Interviews were transcribed as completely as possible for purposes of accuracy. Grounded theory methods were then used to analyze the qualitative data (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). First, this researcher categorized all the comments made by each participant based on the idea (or ideas) that they addressed. Once these ideas were identified, discussed, and their location / occurrence marked in the source data, the frequency and extensiveness (Krueger, 1998) of each was taken into account to provide the foundation for the themes/categories that form the findings chapter of this research. This

inductive style of analysis was chosen to focus the project on participants' understanding in an area where no little prior research has been conducted and ground theory there.

Participant Inclusion Criteria

Participants for this research study were self-identified Catholic sisters who were members of any Catholic religious order or congregation for women and were at least 25 years old. Participants were required to have either a master's level degree in social work or at least five years of experience providing social work services. The kind of social work services that merited inclusion were defined broadly, according to a definition taken from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) online practice guidelines that suggest (but are not necessarily limited to) the following activities: "helping people obtain tangible services; counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes" (NASW, 2013). Participants were invited to identify their own years of social work experience and therefore inclusion eligibility.

Participants were initially recruited through contacts previously known to this researcher to form an initial sample of convenience. Further potential participants were then contacted over the phone, by email, or in person to explain the study and nature of participation, to determine eligibility, and to obtain written informed consent (See Appendix B for a copy of the written recruitment script and Appendix C for the Informed Consent). Finally, a number of additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling based on recommendations of existing sample members.

A total of 12 sisters who were at the time of the study currently working or retired in the U.S. were interviewed for this study. It is important to note that the representativeness of this

sample is limited by the sampling strategy, one of convenience, as well as its small size.

Participants were not compensated in any way for their participation. The nature and limitations

of this kind of sample are addressed further in the discussion chapter (Chapter V).

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Purpose of Study

The primary purpose of this study was to learn from sisters who have also done social work about their spiritual and religious identities, their experiences in social work practice, and finally, their understanding of the relatedness of those two spheres, specifically in terms of mutual or reciprocal influence. Throughout the interview process participants responded to questions designed to elicit their reflections on the commonalities, differences, meanings, and motivations of their experience in the two spheres. Presented in this chapter are both relevant demographics of the study sample and the noteworthy themes that emerged from participant interviews in the analysis of their narratives.

Sample Demographics

Participants. The study population consisted of 12 participants ranging in age from late 40s to early 80s, with a median age of 73. Therefore, this group of participants represents a generational cohort that would largely have reached adulthood in the 1960s, with a few younger and older outliers. The participants represented a total of five different Catholic women's religious communities. Eleven participants joined their religious community immediately after or in the first few years after graduating high school, with the average number of years as a sister being 51.

Participants reported having lived and worked in a diverse array of locations across the U.S. and internationally throughout their lives – more locations than were practical to report in detail for this study in fact. At the time of interview, three participants resided on the West Coast of the U.S., five in the Midwest, and four in the Northeast.

Participants were not formally asked to identify their racial and/or ethnic background, their gender identity and sexual orientation, or the class background of their families of origin. A few participants did address some of these sociocultural identity markers when speaking about their decision to become a sister or about the dynamics of living within a community of other sisters. Several participants also mentioned the salience of these factors when working with clients in the field of social work, often in terms of experiences across difference, e.g. when participants held different identities than did their clients. Of the participants who mentioned various aspects of sociocultural identity in their personal lives or in their work, all cited them as opportunities for personal reflection and growth.

Experience in social work. Eight of the 12 participants began their working careers as teachers and taught students in Catholic parish schools before becoming involved in social work. Only one participant was a practicing social worker prior to joining her congregation.

Most participants described a process of discerning that they wished to do some form of social work over time, often as a natural progression of witnessing inequality in some way or learning about certain social justice teachings of the Church. Others simply found themselves in the midst of social work services after having taken on other titles or roles in communities and organizations where the necessity of those services became apparent - and then returning to graduate school after recognizing a need for what they described as the professional tools offered through a social work program.

In terms of educational background in social work, all participants were credentialed at high levels. At the time of this writing, eight held masters level degrees in social work, with the majority of those having obtained the additional state certifications necessary to practice independently, such as the LCSW. Two obtained doctoral level degrees in social work and two held masters level degrees in other fields, specifically psychology and chaplaincy. All participants also met the study inclusion criteria of more than five years of experience providing social work services.

In their roles as social workers, participants have worked in both religiously affiliated and unaffiliated social service settings. Even amongst the religiously affiliated settings that were reported, about one third of those were sponsored by faiths other than the Catholic Church and another third represented inter-faith or multi-denominational efforts. Participants provided services to communities regardless of religious affiliation and to clients of a variety of personal religious and/or spiritual belief systems.

Many sisters chose not to disclose their religious identities in the workplace, especially if they felt it was not relevant or helpful to their client work. As one explained, "I really didn't mention [my being a sister] to the children and families. I would never deny it of course but I felt that I was not there to evangelize - I was there to help the students and I had to separate the two goals." For most participants, this individual decision about disclosure of religious identity was supported by structures that were already in place in their communities, specifically rules about dress. The vast majority of religious communities who are members of the LCWR no longer wear the habit as part of their everyday clothing. This is a practice that has been thoughtfully examined and reflected upon by sisters' leadership since the time of the Second Vatican Council (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992). In addition, sisters can be recognized in title by the

initials of their congregations, for example, Marie Augusta Neal, SNDden. The SNDden

abbreviation clearly connects to her congregation, the Sisters of Notre Dame de namur, but is

less direct than the use of the prefix "Sister" before her name.

Participants interviewed varied by the roles they occupied within the field of social work

- from community organizing to academia to individual counseling. Table 1 lists the kinds of

practice settings in which participants had experience and mentioned during the course of their

interviews. The list is by no means exhaustive but does give a sense of the wide range of

experiences discussed in the interview process.

Table 1.
Activity, Setting and/or Client population.

Activist / Justice center (multi-issue)
Children in foster care / Residential care
Children with disabilities and/or mental illness
Civil disobedience
Clinic for persons with HIV/AIDS
Collaborative projects with other faith-based groups
Community organizing
Hospice
Human trafficking
Immigration reform
Incarcerated or formerly incarcerated adults
Low-income families
Medical / hospital social work
Other roles / skills: Doula, Reiki, Tai Chi
Political lobbying
Pre-natal clinic for adolescents / young mothers
Socially-conscious investing
Social work education
Substance recovery services for women

Findings of Note

The qualitative data as a whole reveal myriad insights into participants' perspectives on membership in their respective religious communities and within the collective of "American sisters." They also spoke perceptively on their decades of experience in social work and in other capacities related to social service as well, such as being a hospital chaplain or attending births in the role of *doula*.

From this data set, salient themes were compiled to substantiate four findings of note. The first two findings focus on specific qualities that sisters identified about their spirituality. For one, spirituality was seen as "generative," in that it motivated their work alongside oppressed communities, often in the form of professional social work. Second, "woman-affirming" aspects of participants' spirituality were central to participants' decisions to become and remain sisters. The last two findings speak to the nature of their collective identity and the implications of their collaborative work on their spirituality identity and practice of social work. For one thing, participants identified community membership as a mechanism both supporting effective, collective action and sustaining to individual members. Lastly, their responses came together around a final theme on a relationship of reciprocal influence between awareness of oppression and subsequent actions in renegotiating spirituality into a more inclusive and egalitarian framework. This finding takes its title from the words of one participant who articulated that through "rubbing elbows" with others in work and life, her religious and spiritual perspectives grew more complex.

Each of these four findings is described in detail in the following sections with primary attention to the language and significance conveyed by participants. Further, the findings are supported through the inclusion of a few illustrative quotations or clear examples, with

elaboration and summarization after close and repeated reading of qualitative data. It is important to note that the identified themes and the quotations used to support those themes cannot comprehensively represent all the data obtained through the interview process due to limitations in the study's scope.

A generative spirituality. When speaking about spirituality, what emerged from participants were consistent descriptions of a kind of "generative" energy that translated into action that often – but not exclusively - took the form of social work. This generativity was described as a motivating and sustaining force for any type of action geared toward social justice. As one sister put it,

> We work with others to work against unjust structures. We are against war and for immigrant rights […] we have a peace vigil every week. And we participate in civil disobedience with other groups. Four of us sisters were arrested just before [date] […] when you see the suffering of people and how often that suffering comes because of systems, it makes you want to do something about those systems.

Furthermore, this generative spirituality was manifested or expressed for many participants through their decision to become sisters. As one explained, the impetus to join her religious community had much in common with the impetus she felt to do social service work:

> [I had] a desire to be in a relationship with God… but the question is: What do you do with that relationship? How does that become generative in your life? That's different for every person, but in my life that generativity seems best lived out in service.

Because of this generative nature of the spirituality that many participants described, it was difficult for them to entirely disentangle their commitment to service from their commitment to sisterhood. For example:

It's hard to separate my desire to serve as a religious person and my feeling called to be in social work […] I actually don't think about it in that way. It's more about using my gifts to serve in whatever way I'm able.

The responses of this participant also mirrored the first:

Social work is a profession but for me it's also a passion. It's not limited to my employment. It's how I chose to spend my time away from being on duty with my assigned hours. I've been doing this long before I got my MSW.

As echoed by another:

My motivation [to be a sister] now is the commitment to service and the necessity, I think, to live serving others. I am trying to be true to who I am and who I'm called to be and especially as a sister […] It's not often anything grand but I think it [the important part] is the witness of choosing to live on the margins.

Participants also described their spirituality as generative in the sense that it impacted the very way that they "are" in the world or the way they approach their work. One woman shared an example as follows:

having the relationship to God and spirituality in your own life makes a difference in how you treat people, how compassionate you are able to be. The power is not just in me myself but in grace that is related to a larger source. We are just the instruments of grace and turn it into action despite our failings.

Another participant paraphrased the words of Adrian van Kaam, an existential psychologist and Catholic priest, to explain how spirituality generated a sense of freedom in her commitments to membership in her religious community and to her work: "true freedom is not freedom *from* but freedom *to*… freedom to commit oneself, to give oneself and to make oneself available."

Sisters attributed the foundation and/or development of this generative spirituality to both the social justice teachings of the Catholic religion:

> I think Catholic social teaching certainly is fundamental to prioritizing social justice but I think it goes before that when you go to Jesus in his time, that's exactly what he did. He went around and cured people and talked to people and ate with them and drank with them […] So that seems like a natural thing, which is to be with people.

And shared other experiences as well:

> Social work was a part of seeing the difficulties people experienced and the injustice in some of their struggles and wanting to address that. My motivation has evolved over the last 40 years by moving officially into the part of social work that works for social justice. That really resonates with my soul.

Furthermore, with the exception of one participant, all were sisters first and came into social work later in their lives, often describing their work as a way to embody or "do" the values and beliefs of their spirituality. Even in the case of the individual who was a social worker by training before joining her religious community, her decision to join was described as a way to go deeper into the work in which she was already invested and to align herself with the spiritual values that the work represented:

> I had always had an active spiritual life before then but I saw joining the [community] as a way to go deeper with that and plus I appreciated their values. I was drawn to be in solidarity with people who are economically poor […] and a way to do it was in community […] It was to be able to go deeper into that than I could go on my own…both in terms of lifestyle and of who the neighbors were. Because they [sisters] lived and worked in the same community or even if they worked out of the community they had

relationships with the neighbors. It was important for us to put feet on the ground and be in solidarity with people who are economically poor. And it still is.

Despite the fact that sisters' orientation toward social action is not exclusive to membership in a community of women religious, their embrace of a generative spirituality is in some ways a definition of membership so much so that sisters are recognized not for their formal religious roles but for their behavior:

Many people who come to us belong to other faiths and know that we are 'Sisters' but don't know what that means. They might ask, 'Do you have a husband?' […] But our neighbors come to us when there are problems on the street or if their kids need help with a school project because they see us as a safe place [...] We have probably celebrated more Muslim holidays and holy days here at the center [than Catholic] because that reflects the community we serve. So I would say my view of myself has grown, it's no longer defined by my visibility as a member of a parish or recognized through dress, I am only recognized in the neighborhood because I think people know we're kind and people know that we care for them.

A different participant shared a related experience:

In this area where no community members had any experience with Catholic women religious, I was asked, "Are you all blood sisters or the other kind?" I didn't know what the 'other kind' was but they then said, "I don't know much about sisters but I know you're mighty good neighbors." So we were accepted first as people and as kind people, without them knowing much about our background.

That this neighborly quality of sisters' work and presence was often a more salient identity marker for many participants than were their formal religious roles (especially outside of

Catholic circles) is apparent in these quotes. The examples again speak to the generative quality that is so central to the spirituality described.

The final result of the generative spirituality endorsed by participants is that it prompted each individual to obtain professional education to do better work:

I think being a sister has made me realize that it isn't enough just to be about doing good, it's certainly a lot but it isn't enough. And you need to be educated. Whether that's education for yourself as a teacher or any other profession.

As another shared:

I have the obligation all the time to seek out the best practice for something and there are ways of doing things better than I can know innately or better than I can pray about. I need to… we have the obligation to find out best practices.

Similarly, this participant felt that,

[Part of education] is really recognizing that it's a developmental conscientization or consciousness raising if you come out of a really isolated, black and white, judgmental…whether it's family culture or religious culture or whatever. I've just been phenomenally touched by the opportunity to witness students who grow through that too and are able to fully embrace the social work values and ethics over time... because it's a maturation thing and an exposure thing.

Furthermore, speaking on professional education is also where one sister expressed the limits of melding the two roles of social work and spirituality:

It's a danger to meld the roles of professional social worker and Sister. And the danger is that people are entitled to professionalism. In a place like this [current position], we can lose that perspective. For example, staff here sometimes treats it like home when they're

here and you can look on our clients, our guests, as your children. We cannot allow that to happen. They are adult guests who are entitled to our professional attitude. Do you try to give them more than that? Yes but you have to make sure and there's a danger that you can give them less. […] there's a value in seeing them as consumers because they have rights and you've got to be aware of their rights. So it's a dance you have to play. Our mission is to elevate them as high as they can be. And to esteem them for the value they have […] yet the professional boundary is for their [client's] sake not ours.

This generative energy, illustrated by the above, translates into social work services and action on behalf of social justice. It motivates sisters' decisions to become a sister and to get educated as a social worker. It also generates a way of being and quality of presence for which participants have been recognized. Participants also articulated the limitations of fusing their spiritual motivations too closely with their work despite the interconnectedness of those roles.

"Woman-affirming" aspects of spirituality motivate and sustain membership. Sister-hood means membership in a religious community is that they is entirely comprised and led – from national leadership structures to individual convents – by women. Therefore, the decision to enter a given community for spiritual reasons and to remain in that community over one's lifetime is a decision that on a fundamental level prioritizes the presence, identity and experience of women. As will be shown in the examples in this section, the decision to become a sister represents an embrace of woman-affirming spirituality.

Every participant interviewed in this project expressed that her motivation to become a sister was related in some part to admiration for other sisters - in some cases who taught or mentored the participant personally or in other cases who the participant witnessed embodying

some quality that was meaningful. The memories of one participant who entered her community

more than 60 years ago are a good example of this dynamic:

> There were these wonderful sisters in [the state participant lived as a young adult], they
> were wonderful people and good teachers and they lived simply. In those days they
> didn't have those nice convents out West like they do now… these sisters were
> pioneers. In retrospect, I think that was one factor that influenced my decision to become
> a sister. They were pioneer-type people. They weren't the kind of people who would hit
> you with a ruler [as was the stereotype]. They were the people who were flexible […]
> and had good senses of humor. […] I was impressed with how dedicated they were and I
> thought I wanted to be like that.

The admiration expressed for older sisters clearly underscores their position as role models who,

with their all-female networks of mentorship and leadership, existed before the modern

Women's Rights Era. Another participant echoed, "I was taken by their joy, their sense of

community and spirituality. They seemed so happy and they had this common work often

running big, big institutions before that was the norm."

One participant framed her decision to become a sister as a conscious move toward these

networks of female mentorship and leadership, characterizing her vocation and personal and

professional growth as:

> very tied into being able to work, play, whatever with a group of women who have a very
> significant commitment to what I would call being 'bridge builders" […] I think that in
> many ways, I grew up professionally in a community of women […] When I entered
> community there was this core group of activists, women, who had a great deal of contact
> with the younger members of the community. That group played an enormous role in

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creating and helping us to really develop the development of social consciousness,

critical thinking and that sort of thing.

Many participants also described being a sister as a context in which meaningful relationships

formed:

Our life in common is central. […] Each of us - I think this is a universal truth - is

looking for the perfect family in one way or another. We're looking for that unit within

which we can belong passionately and lovingly, that defines us and gives us parameters.

Religious life is an attempt at that, not unlike married or family life. That will always be

the pursuit, I think, and you see how it gets played out all over the place […] On so many

levels that's what's operative. For us [sisters], this is one way.

Another participant also elaborated the important relationships that were grown and fostered as a

result of being a sister, despite the fact that it does not always conform to social expectations

about marriage and family life, "My dad thought that [my becoming a sister] meant I was

disappointed in love, that it was a decision to be cold and aloof. My personal experience was

completely different and that it was actually a life filled with love of other kinds." This kind of

community life and love is essential to the present day, one sister shared:

My priority is [...] being with a number of our older sisters. Reaching out to them. I have

a responsibility as a community member to reach out to them - woman who have done

these unbelievable things in their lives - and to walk with them as they are declining, all

of that is part of the total walk. It's both the strength and the responsibility of community

life […] The strength that comes from community is the morale and emotional strength of

getting together with others who think the same on some vital issues, having a group you

pool with where ideas feed of one another so you can come up with some things together that you couldn't do alone.

The theme of woman-affirming spirituality is also highlighted by a number of participants spoke about claiming their voices – not outside the Catholic Church but within it. For example, one sister feels that:

Woman-affirming spirituality [that] could be an alternative vision […] a whole vision of how things can be done differently that is collaborative and not the top-down model. [The present] is culturally defined, it's hierarchically defined, it's paternalistically defined and patriarchally defined. But that hasn't to do with the essence.

This new, yet still connected, vision of woman-affirming spirituality within the Catholic Church is evident in the response of a few other participants. One stated that her membership in a religious community should not be read as her support for the Catholic Church as an institution. As she put it, "I don't align myself with the institutional Church. […] Compliance to an institution is not my motivation." Yet another sister put it this way:

I've been a part of "alternative" Catholic Church for 22 years partly because of the feelings that the Church has about women. We are very open to the ideas of a more sane, holistic, opinion about women. [We draw this holistic view from] just from basic values, such as the equality of men and women, and myself also from being a woman and being in this community.

Some sisters do worry about their ability to continue to provide female leadership and stay in the Church:

while feeling personally crushed and ministerially undermined [by male hierarchy]. We can choose to leave or we can stay and work for systemic change. I think Sisters play a

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role in trying to enrich people's spiritual life […] There have been many other great social advocates who were silenced by the Church.

The examples presented above paint a picture of how sisters' decisions to enter a religious community of women is, by its nature, a step in support of woman-affirming spirituality. The woman-affirmative stance is supported both through sisters' actions in support of their community and their spiritual perspectives about gender equality and the ways that may be manifest in religious structures.

Mechanisms of community: membership, collective action and personal support. Participants were asked if they felt that their religious and/or spiritual life as a sister had influenced their practice of social work. Further, they were prompted to describe any commonalities or differences between the values, activities, and/or goals of social work and religious life. In response to this line of questioning, religious community emerged as a fundamental aspect of being a sister that support the practice of social work. The importance of religious community in supporting sisters' involvement in social work constitutes the third thematic finding from the data and will be supported below.

Sisters' community supports collective action. Being part of an organized, religious community was identified by all 12 participants as central to the actual activities and services they performed or provided in the field of social work. As one sister remarked, "we're great at organizing. It's one of our strengths." More specifically, participants explained that community membership could be used as leverage to do more large-scale and more effective work because individual members are understood to be acting as representatives of a larger group:

In terms of our mission, we do feel that is going forward […] things happen – simple things – but they come together through the network we have. For example, there's a

group of hotels, an international chain, we got to train all of their staff to be on the

lookout for trafficked persons [because religious community leadership organization

asked them to do so]. So it's the leverage that happens that way, of being a part of a

larger community. It's practical.

Another sister elaborated the same point:

Being together and doing things together as a community has …gives a voice that a

single person couldn't have. Clout is not the word I want to use but there's a sense that

being connected really does make a difference… So an example is [retirement

investments], we didn't want those investments to fund war and things like that […] we

don't invest in certain companies because we don't agree with what their mission is. We

also have another fund which we call the "shareholder activity" fund. In that fund we

have shares of [defense contractor] stock and [oil company] so that we can have a voice

with those corporations and try to have them have human rights policies and that kind of

thing. In that case it's the collective and it's because there's a lot of voices speaking that

we have an impact.

This larger group of sisters – a group that extends through and above individual orders or

congregations – harnesses the power of collective action through their internal leadership and

communication structures:

There's a lot of support from community, both the local and the distant

communities. The administration of our community is very sympathetic to the cause and

involved. They've made possible all the work in justice issues. Maybe it's a matter of

available time. […] Our awareness being stirred and there's support to act on that. The

support of other people having the same concerns.

One sister mentioned that in her community, someone has the full-time role of emailing and calling other community members to raise awareness and prompt action around social justice issues.

Beyond collective action, participants shared that the social justice model was a critical element of group identity that was "thought through" and affirmed and therefore supported collective action:

[Social justice] definitely got reinforced in a religious community setting by virtue of the group always working together to try to make a difference in people's lives. Certainly that happens in social work but I think the difference [for sisters] might be that it's the effect of a group that shares identity, in terms of the religious life identity, there's an identity around a social justice agenda that gets critically thought through.

Organized networks of sisters also have social capital that stems from religious affiliation, for example the title of "Sister" itself and the association of "Sisters" with social services:

We'll even go to a shareholder meeting and get up and - I usually don't say my name is "Sister So and So" - but when I go there I do. And then say why we have the stock to fund our own retirement and mission [...] and we do not want our funds to go to things that go against our values.

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment but in the context of having conducted research on the effects of a particular program and sharing that information with policy staff:

[Policy staff] also said, we trust what [policy feedback] you're giving to us because we know who you [sisters] are. I think the advocacy now is growing, tainted a little bit by the grey hairs.

Sisters' community sustains individual members and their work. All 12 participants in this study also identified that being part of a religious community was sustaining on a personal level and in terms of their individual work as social workers. A clarification and summary of the benefits and challenges or membership was provided by this participant,

> My life is not the life of a single woman and I have obligations and responsibilities to this community [of sisters]. Our relationship is weighed into my decisions … interestingly though, at times, having the support of the congregation has given me the courage to do things I wouldn't have been able to do on my own.

Membership in religious community also supported social work in terms of sisters' morale. Relationships with other sisters are a part of community life that is personally sustaining, especially in the midst of intense work:

> It's important to feel the support of my own community. And it's good to know that whatever one of us is, our community is there too. And I get that sense of – whenever I'm doing what I'm doing – that I'm representing community.

As elaborated further by another participant:

> The strength that comes from community is the morale and emotional strength, of getting together with others who think the same on some vital issues, having a group you pool with where ideas feed of one another so you can come up with some things together that you couldn't do alone.

The sustaining nature of relationships was noted:

> It's relationships with people that sustain us. Work doesn't sustain us. So to make choices – because the work will always be there – but it's the relationships that need to be part of the equation.

Community membership was mentioned for its support of professional perspectives:

> When I was working in residential setting for pregnant adolescents in the foster care system, my boss decided to be present at one of the house meetings. She was amazed at how well the meetings went and she said to me, 'I think that living in religious community has helped you know how to facilitate the meetings.' Because we had house meetings in our convent: allowing people to talk, allowing people to work out any conflicts - which are part of any group in an egalitarian way. One example of the dialogues I facilitated with the adolescents was after one had run away. I left the decision of whether or not she could return to the home up to her housemates. There was a dialogue, a conversation and they said 'yes.' And I'd let them deal with it, independently and speak for themselves, treating them like they had sense and could come up with their own decisions. So in terms of social work practice, letting people be who they are and treating them with respect is something I lived within my own community.

Community membership also provides practical individual support in the form of finances. Financial collaboration was cited by participants as giving individuals the freedom to pursue unpaid ministry that may be worthwhile and further the community's mission, yet not be "reimbursable" in a traditional way. Several participants spoke of their vow of poverty with a sense of appreciation. As one participant shared, "there is a luxury of living in community and sharing things in common that frees you for mission … and there's a luxury in chosen poverty that is freeing because it allowed you to walk with people that - another life choice with family or children - would not be possible or would be different

Financial collaboration is also how sisters live out their religious vow of poverty. It also represents a philosophy of "simplicity" wherein they are not stewards of their own paycheck but

rather contribute their earnings to the larger group in order for all members' needs to be met. As one Sister explained, "vows give us freedom; evangelical poverty gives us the impetus and support to live simply in a society that allows us to be different from society." At the same time, collaboration of finances can create for community members the same type of responsibility that family breadwinners have to provide concrete resources to dependents. Given that the population of sisters is aging on the whole, several participants who were working reported that this responsibility to obtain a salary and bring income to support the community is significant and motivated their choice of profession or role.

These findings suggest that sisters' membership in their community supports collective action, often as related to social work, and sustains individual sisters in their work and personal lives as well.

"Rubbing elbows" as a catalyst for amplifying or renegotiating spiritual framework. This final theme represents a dynamic reported by virtually all participants: work alongside marginalized individuals and communities or witnessing the oppression of some – often through social work activities and roles – prompted participants to amplify and often renegotiate their spiritual perspectives in light of that experience.

As clearly stated by one participant, "rubbing elbows" – a phrase that implies side-by-side work with people - in the challenges of life is a formative experience in terms of personal knowledge and spiritual perspective. This participant says:

Sisters are rubbing elbows and the real world is seen [...] [That work allows us] to really be in touch with the challenges of daily living [...] whether its contact with patients in a hospital, contact with kids in school, contact walking the streets of [large city]. Our sisters are there doing it and that's a very formative experience in the sense of, you

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develop some instincts and you begin to give yourself permission to hold on the instincts

in terms of life is really lived.

Another participant cited the role of listening to clients' stories and how that interpersonal

relationship not only brought her contact with reality but inspired generosity in her response and

approach:

I think we are influenced a great deal by stories and by people's lives. The more we're

exposed to what is real out there, the more we can appreciate and know and become

much more generous with what we do.

This generous approach was echoed by another participant who stated:

[My work] is trying to create an experience of being 'cared for' for them [clients] by my

actions; then you become their ally and it prompts you to reconsider [previous beliefs].

Lived experience was cited often as informative to both attitudes and pastoral approach:

I had a very close mentor who was a sister and in her own work worked with adolescent

mothers. And she was really strong about abortion and how… challenging these people

who are supposedly pro-life saying, "you're not supposed to have an abortion, you're

supposed to have the baby" and then after you have the baby and you're living in poverty

and then the same people are like go get a job… It wasn't that she was pro-abortion. It

was just that she wanted to help people make their decision and have, you know, a decent

life.

Participant after participant reported this dynamic of expanding her perspective through social

work activities and roles, although each was couched in her own experience and voice:

It's about getting to know people and getting to love them. There's so much theology

and negative research [about homosexuality] but is there anything to indicate that is

abhorrent? No, it's just minority. […] Probably 70% of our clinic population were LGBT and the clinic staff were too, and I know we're all part of God's people.

Another participant shared:

I firmly believe in same sex marriage. I believe in the ordination of women. What informs beliefs is often in my social work, having met so many different people and going into people's homes and seeing their reality. Having been right in front of the 'nitty gritty' of everyday life through social work has given me a broader picture of humanity, whereas the [Church] hierarchy doesn't see or do that or necessarily have the freedom to do that.

These perspectives are often on topics (women's equality, same-sex marriage, abortion) that are not inherently "spiritual" or "religious" to all people; yet, the topics are reflective of spiritual and religious beliefs of sisters because they live in a religiously identified way and their home Church has determined that these topics are reflections of spiritual and religious teachings.

Sisters report beliefs that on the surface may seem contradictory to official Church teachings. However, they evince an understanding of their spirituality that is complex and informed by work with "the people of God:"

I think our broader view [of Church teaching] is the fruit of prayer, the encyclical on peace and justice and the fruit of work with communities. It's an integration of how I believe the Holy Spirit speaks to me and I'm not alone. The Spirit speaks to me through the signs of the times and by being with "being with those who are economically poor and oppressed and accompanying them, not trying to fix them or remove them from their milieu but actually being companions with them on their life journey. It's a combination of life experience.

Furthermore, because their spiritual perspectives are so rooted in their work for oppressed and marginalized communities (the very work their spirituality prompted them to undertake), these perspectives do not feel at odds with their faith but a natural evolution of that faith. As explained by one participant, "We definitely feel that we're part of the Church. Sometimes we say we're an alternative voice." Another sister shared her understanding of spiritual beliefs in terms of this evolutionary process:

> When experience gives you gray as opposed to black and white, the assurances fall and you have to deal with life. Our great theological insight now is that life is an evolution. It wasn't a one-time shot, it's actually evolving. There's no way to deal with that in black and white. You're having to discern. And that's an asceticism. It's much more of an asceticism to have to discern the truth than to have to live in a black and white world.

Participants reported a move away from traditions and teachings that they began to view through the lens of experience – personal and work related – that highlighted the underlying sexism, heterosexism, classism and other forms of domination within those traditions and teachings. Their renegotiated and amplified perspectives were also influenced by their own experiences of oppression within the Church.

> We talk about injustices in the Church as well. One project was … we asked women across the country to tell us a story of a time when they had a decision of "conscience" to make that disagreed with how they felt the Church would want them to make it but the woman made their decision. […] We have these stories of a woman who wanted to be a priest, who wanted ordination, who had a decision related to abortion, it's a very … when you know a person who's in the midst of making a decision, you can't just make that a

black and white ruling on something [in the way the Church does]. To have complexity in the picture really changes your way of looking at things. It's very powerful.

In the examples above, sisters emphasize the complexity that arises from lived experience and work experience alongside marginalized and oppressed communities – "rubbing elbows" with them. This complexity informs their spiritual perspectives and the stances they hold on a number of critical issues. Although the specificities of topics mentioned in this chapter certainly cannot be construed to represent the beliefs of all participants or all sisters, there is a level of consistency among their responses that is informative. Their beliefs and behavior are influenced by the complex realities with which they have had first-hand experience through social work and other contexts. Therefore, the evolution participants spoke of in terms of belief and behavior can therefore be partially connected to social work experience. Sisters also consistently offered challenges to traditions of patriarchy, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression in the institutional Church yet do so because it is a reflection of the spirituality that motivated them to become part of the Church in the first place.

Summary

The findings presented in this chapter illustrate the perspectives of Catholic sisters who participated in the interviews for this study on their religious and spiritual roles and professional social work activities. The four noteworthy themes that emerged from the interviews are:

1) Participants possess a spiritual framework that is generative, in that it generates action for social justice, often in the form of social work.

2) Participants possess a woman-affirming spirituality that supports and prioritizes women's spiritual experience and leadership.

3) Membership in religious community by sisters in this sample supports aspects of social work.

4) Experience with marginalized and oppressed groups has prompted at least participants in this study to amplify and renegotiate their spirituality, often in a way that appears more inclusive and based on the needs of the communities they serve.

The next and final chapter presents these noteworthy findings in light of existing literature and implications for social work practice. Limitations of this study will be identified and, finally, recommendations for further research will be suggested.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Introduction

The aims of this project were multi-faceted. At its core are Catholic sisters in social work: from their sociocultural and historical rootedness in the field to their evolving frameworks for committed and collective modes of awareness and action. These evolving frameworks stem from both spiritual and religious sources as well as an understanding that "experience possessed its own authority" (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992, p. 38). Therefore, this study explored how sisters who work in social work understand their experiences and view themselves in both spheres. Further, the study asked if – and if so, how – their dual roles in social work and religious life influence each other or overlap.

Interviews conducted with 12 sisters who have worked in social work constituted the empirical portion of this study. Their rich narratives revealed complex conceptualizations of their beliefs and behaviors as sisters and as social workers. Noteworthy findings took shape around qualities of their spiritual framework, specifically that it is "generative" and "woman-affirming." Additional findings related to sisters' community, specifically that membership in community supports individual and collective social work roles, and to social work experience, in that their experience with oppressed communities through social work and other forms of service could be a catalyst for renegotiating or adding complexity to spiritual beliefs and behaviors.

In this final chapter, the noteworthy findings of the study are examined in light of existing literature and also in terms of their implications for social work practice. The limitations of this study are identified and, finally, recommendations for future research are suggested.

Sisters' Spirituality: Generative and Woman-Affirming

Participants' descriptions of their spirituality as generative and woman-affirming provide meaningful data on the way a group of American women religious understand their faith and the implications of that faith. The foregrounding of these two qualities of spirituality was evident in the data set and the reason they were reported as findings of note in the previous chapter. Furthermore, these qualities are noteworthy because they exist in the context of women's exclusion from official leadership structures in the Church and the censorship of women religious in their attempts to sincerely dialogue about their faith (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2012; Johnson, 2013). Although a gender-based pattern of exclusion and censorship has often worked to obscure the significant contributions of sisters to the theological and institutional substance of the Church (Thomson, 1991) and seems to contradict the Church's own teachings on social justice, sisters continue to demonstrate a deep connection to their spiritual and religious beliefs and roles.

This study's finding on "generativity" – a word intended to convey the energizing nature of spirituality (an energy that often generates service) - as a central component of spirituality demonstrates that sisters have taken seriously the call of the Second Vatican Council to serve humanity and prioritize the "this-worldly" presence of God. This finding corroborates existing research that the religious beliefs characteristic of the post-Vatican II period correlate with increased receptiveness and ability to change (Neal, 1970). In other words, sisters have a strong sense of drive fueled by their spirituality, and this translates into the work participants described

in myriad social service and activist settings. Their qualitative reports of thoughtfully dialoguing and/or taking action in areas that reflect their belief systems - from protesting nuclear facilities and international warfare to addressing the needs of children in foster care or of immigrant families - also mirror sources documenting them as raising their voices to speak on religious and spiritual issues in American public life and within the global Catholic Church (Campbell, 2014; Dellinger, 2013).

The "woman-affirming" qualities of the spirituality and religious practices described by participants seem to partially address issues of structural oppression within their home institution of the Church. Participants' examples of prioritizing mentorship between women religious or emphasis on sisters' networks of leadership and education, while still maintaining located within the hierarchical Church, dovetail with previous research suggesting that identity-affirming components of belief systems must be highlighted to correspond to the developmental maturity of believers (Wuthnow, 1999). Without specific points of departure from oppressive traditions, believers risk sacrificing either their belief itself or the wisdom obtained through their own identity development (Wuthnow). Thus, sisters' willingness to create "alternatives" (as one participant phrased it) that are still within the Church speaks to their commitment to their spiritual home. Yet, in continuing to seek access to the power to define their spiritual practices and frameworks, they embrace the wisdom earned through their own positionality as women (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992). Despite the limited scope of this study in terms of sample size and theoretical focus, the narratives shared by participants do counter the absence of women's perspectives that has been the status quo in the U.S. and in the Catholic Church.

Processes of religious community: Collective action and individual growth

The strength of sisters' communities is apparent in the findings reported, most notably in terms of their capacity to support the dual processes of working together effectively and meeting individual needs for autonomous work and growth. The mission or vision that is held in common by these women, often as encapsulated by the charism of a given congregation or the vows taken by all sisters, is a central element of religious community and was referenced often by participants as a way of supporting these dual processes. Stated more simply, having a common mission helped sisters to work together and independently. This finding is supported by research often consisting of accounts and investigations compiled by sisters that detail community processes (Schneiders, 2013). Research on other types of communities in which individual members are committed to a cause (often non-religious) has shown as well that community missions and/or visions enhance collective aims as well as individual members' understanding of their community, their investment in that community, and their ability to intentionally contribute to and steer it (Gittell & Wilder, 2002).

Collective work is one of the aforementioned processes of religious community and, by examining the initiatives undertaken by sisters who participated in this study, are explored in light of existing research. In this study, participants provided examples of how their religious networks had successfully impacted outcomes related to human trafficking, ethical investing and divesting, and U.S. healthcare policy, among other things. These examples match with accounts about collective identity supporting the success of sisters' work (Wittberg, 2006); while examples in the field of social work also underscore the idea that group cohesion leads to more effective outcomes in the chosen project or area (Grey & Fook, 2004).

The experience of sharing a common vision as having contributed to individual growth constitutes the second process of religious community highlighted in the findings. Examples in the social work organizational development demonstrate that improved psychosocial support for individual practitioners is often the result of a communally held and articulated mission (Saleeby, 2002). Similarly, results of this study suggested that participants felt able to grow and be supported within the framework of their religious community and shared religious beliefs and roles. Interestingly, participants also articulated a sense of freedom in their commitment to each other, while on a more practical level financial collaboration could be seen as "freeing" in the sense that it alleviates some of the burden that individual workers may carry. At the same time, some participants acknowledged the additional stress of feeling responsible for fellow sisters, especially as retired sisters outweigh those able to work and bring income to the community. It is unclear to what degree the sense of individual support outweighs or not the strain of community membership, but both components must be acknowledged in a complete analysis, a duty that has been asked of all members of religious communities as they move forward with far fewer recruits and fewer institutions that direct their work (Wittberg, 2006).

Experiences in Social Work Influence Spiritual Beliefs and Behaviors

This last finding highlights a dynamic conveyed by participants in which spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors were impacted by experiences in social work settings. Although the social work setting was certainly only one of many locations as having a critical impact on the development of their spirituality, this study was particularly focused on social work as the location of primary interest due to personal accounts (Campbell, 2014; Quiñonez & Turner, 1992) and some research data (Wittberg, 2006) that suggest that sisters have found those types of experiences particularly meaningful, having prompted shifts in their awareness and activity

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(activity in the sense of what they chose to do with that awareness). For this reason, all participants had at least five years' experience in social work or related activities and were specifically asked to speak to the impact of those activities on their spirituality.

As described in the findings, social work with clients, whether those clients were individuals or communities or larger systems, often provided meaningful reference points for sisters in terms of defining the reality of oppression and marginalization: larger forces became concrete in the lived experience of those they served. Sisters proved themselves willing and able to combat those forces, despite the sacrifices required in terms of personal comforts, the security of "knowing" or having one correct answer, and other privileges that often prevent individuals from taking action against injustice and grappling with complexity (Neal, 1971).

Sisters in this study sample also reported that their belief in the dignity of the people they served compelled them to combat the disenfranchisement and oppression those people experienced, whether due to gender, class, race, relationship and parenting status, or sexual orientation. Furthermore, in realizing that the teachings of their Church often actively reinforced those disenfranchising and oppressive systems, sisters chose to adapt their beliefs and participation in those religious practices to reflect this deepened and humanized vision of justice. Although many critics have argued that sisters' adaptations represent misguided interpretations of true Catholic teaching, this author posits that sisters' evolution in spiritual beliefs and practices actually passes the "test of the authenticity of religious belief and practice [which] is in the greater humanization effected by believers […] This is reasoned on the basis of the fact that this content of humanization is in the original Scriptures" (Neal, 1970, p. 8).

Data on sisters' evolution of spiritual beliefs and behaviors in response to cumulative experience also reinforces findings that adult spirituality requires passing through stages of

growth (Fowler, 1981) and is often the result of deep questioning and adaptation (Wuthnow, 1999). Sisters provide another example of how some traditions of spirituality must be renegotiated by those they have oppressed or excluded, such as women and people of color, in order to be relevant and meaningful and to account for the complexity of human experience (Tisdell, 2002).

Sisters also reported that their education in social work school or in other professional (albeit informal) learning contexts has helped them to understand the dynamics of power and privilege and apply that knowledge to their work and lives within the Church. This finding on the importance of experience and professionalization fits within existing social work research about the centrality of both the field experience and interpersonal contexts in general (often relational experiences across difference) in challenging social workers' assumptions based on their personal experiences, sociocultural location, belief systems, and other systems of privilege and oppression (Field, 2000; Goldstein, 2001).

Ultimately, the role of social work as a catalyst for evolving spiritual perspectives was reinforced in the findings of this study and is therefore, in this author's estimation, a demonstrable contribution to our understanding of the relationship between spirituality and social work for sisters. Furthermore, these findings correspond to existing research in the field of social work and religion and spirituality in terms of the role that social work plays in belief systems and practices, specifically for sisters.

Limitations

The lack of clear definitions of spirituality and religion in the literature review and empirical portion of this study may cause confusion for some if they are looking to understand nuances of the spiritual or religious teachings of the Catholic Church. However, in the hopes of

conveying only those elements relevant to the study's questions and/or those that may be found to be more universally engaging, this project has avoided delving too deeply into content of Catholic belief systems. Rather, the central focus was the process by which sisters arrived at their spiritual perspectives and the implications of those beliefs and perspectives, especially as related to "the epistemological processes by which sisters know their life and its meaning"(Quiñonez & Turner, 1992, p. 31) on their lives in dual roles.

The goal of understanding epistemological processes was helped by the qualitative research design chosen for this study. However, the identification of the 12 participants in this study under the singular label of sisters should not lead to generalizing findings from this small group to the more than 50,000 American women who also share that label. Although this study has specified that it focuses particularly on sisters who are part of the LCWR and the findings can be seen to reflect the perspectives documented by LCWR leadership (Sanders, 2014; Mock, 2014), 20% of American Catholic sisters are not represented by the LCWR, limiting the study's conclusions to this sample – that is, to this group of sisters who share a particular focus.

Furthermore, there are many formative and essential aspects of sisters' experience in religious life in their spirituality and in social work that were not addressed by this study. For example, age-related effects in the information collected from this group of participants are worth considering. Research suggests that the initial entry, education, and socialization processes that these women undergo as they became new members of their religious community - in addition to the influence of the wider Church community and American society - deeply shape belief systems and worldviews (Wittberg, 2006). The sisters interviewed for this study averaged 51 years of membership in their communities at the time of writing, with very few younger or older outliers. Thus, the majority of participants were young sisters – or about to become sisters

– at the time of the theological and institutional shifts prompted by Vatican II; indeed, these participants reflect attitudes (spiritual among others) that are representative of the transformative nature of that era.

In addition to similarities with regard to age, participants frequently spoke of gender dynamics in terms characteristic of second-wave feminists by emphasizing a relationally-oriented, compassionate moral style that women often bring to the table (Gilligan, 1982). This was cast in contrast to more hierarchical, "top-down" models characteristic of the male-led Church. Perhaps the synchronicity of sisters' perspectives with early gender theorists can be connected to the time frames in which they were in professional and/or academic settings or relate to the on-going rigid gender roles of the institutional Church. In either case, it is clear that the members of this sample had a great deal in common in terms of their socialization – a commonality that serves as an important reminder to not generalize these qualitative findings outside of this sample but to use them as implications for further research.

Another limit of the study is the combination of in-person and telephone interviews. Although there is no research to suggest how these methods of data gathering might have affected the interview process, body language and other forms of nonverbal communication were clearly absent over the telephone, creating a lack of consistency in data collection.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this study was influenced by aspects of this researcher's identity which (according to post-structural feminist lenses) influence both how data is gathered and how knowledge is constructed (Kanuha, 2000; Tisdell, 2002). In this case, the choice of literature used to frame the study as well as the choice of questions and interpretations that constitute the method and findings may be biased by the fact that the researcher is not a Catholic sister but was raised Catholic and is currently a master's student in social work.

Implications for Social Work Education, Practice and Leadership

While recognizing the important distinction that being a sister is a way of life and social work is a professional role, social work can benefit from a close analysis of the findings that have emerged from this study of sisters. With regard to qualities of spirituality, the findings on "generativity" conveyed that this concept generates a lifelong commitment to social justice that is often embodied in social work activities spanning the range of direct service to macro work. For this reason, social work institutions and educators should consider the value systems that - while certainly not religious or spiritual - are imparted to new students and professionals and that may sustain their work in the long-term. Given that spirituality was central to these sisters in terms of both personal meaning and connection to a larger community, all practitioners across differences in terms of the content of their belief systems may benefit from examining the frameworks that give meaning and motivation to their lives, both personal and professional.

The findings that spoke to sisters' experiences of their religious community, specifically that membership supports individual and collective social work roles, suggest that the governing bodies and professional organizations that guide and lead the field serve the important function of fostering individual professional growth as well as leveraging group size and experience to achieve collective goals. Therefore, the collaborative models of action demonstrated by sisters could be considered models for social work's own leadership institutions to support members of the professional field and prevent unfortunate dynamics such as burn-out.

Another significant finding of this study is that social work experience can be a catalyst for renegotiating or adding complexity to spiritual beliefs and behaviors. That social work experience serves as an instrument of shaping sisters' spiritual beliefs and behaviors may also speak to the importance of fieldwork in guiding belief systems and approaches to action in

general. This finding suggests that foregoing the fieldwork components of social work curriculum, as some programs have recently done or are considering doing (Sewpaul & Jones, 2007), would be counter-indicated for educating competent professionals who can recognize the knowledge to be gained from working with not just individual clients but larger systems as well.

Furthermore, analysis of this study's findings on the role of social work in shaping spirituality also connote the reality that sisters' receptiveness to social work as a source of information is based on the institutional supports in place within their religious communities and within the theological frameworks endorsed by the Church. Without the context of these institutional supports and frameworks, it is possible that the information to be gathered from social work would have been lost on sisters or suppressed to some degree (given that it challenges the dominant Catholic narrative).

Both social workers (Modesto, Weaver, & Flannelly, 2006) and sisters (Quiñonez & Turner, 1992) have been engaged in a process of transforming and adapting their own values, priorities, and activities over time to stay in line with the changing needs of their context. While social work has also been engaged in a struggle to differentiate and legitimize as a profession and still stay true to its advocacy for the most disenfranchised (Park, 2005), sisters in a similar way can be seen as having to redefine their beliefs and behaviors to adequately reflect their values and achieve their missions. Ultimately, sisters' continued resistance to being co-opted by political forces or silenced in their search for a more just distribution of power (Neal, 1984) could be a useful example for social workers who, necessarily, must balance their helping efforts within the existing sociopolitical order without becoming enforcers or enablers of existing structures of dominance and oppression (Kivel, 2000).

Recommendations for Future Research

While content of professionals' religious belief systems should not translate into the content of work with people conceptualized as clients, activists and social workers may benefit from an exploration of spirituality given that various types of human-service practitioners have found "they needed to develop a spirituality that would support their justice work" (Tisdell, 2002, p. 138). Given that these Catholic sisters present a model of inhabiting deeply meaningful spiritual and religious beliefs that motivate and sustain their social work activities, the question for social work becomes how they might benefit from this example of personally felt and communally practiced belief. This is clearly a next step in attempting to seek ways in which the field of social work can grow in its practices, generally.

Sisters also touched on the need for balance between internal beliefs and external actions, although this was not a central focus of this study. In light of this, the connection of inner work (through centering, meditation, and other internally located practices) and outer work (working for greater equity in the world, such as in social work) merits further exploration (Fox, 1995).

Finally, religious institutions and spiritual leaders may benefit from looking at the mechanisms of social work and other professions and learning experiences to understand how they can serve as new sources of information for developing spiritual beliefs and behaviors, much in the way social work experience humanizes and contextualizes oppression and marginalization for sisters. Unfortunately, given that the church and religious institutions often lack mechanisms for review of choices made by decision-makers, "the probability that practice of religion can be little more than rationalization for things as they are is very high" (Neal, p. 8). Nonetheless, how religious leaders can combat this reinforcement of the status quo through social work is worth exploring.

Conclusion

This study has investigated how sisters who are also social work professionals understand their experiences in both the spheres of religious life and social work practice, with specific attention to belief and behavior, as well as how these two spheres influence each other or overlap. Participants' responses identified aspects of spirituality and community life that sustain them and their work, and that have in turn, broadened and helped to shape their spiritual beliefs and behaviors. Although more research needs to be done to understand the intersection of religious and spiritual belief, social work and the specific experiences of Catholic sisters as women and as a cohort, this study has offered a deeper look into these dynamics, and therefore, a beginning.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

PART A
1. Name:
2. Order / Congregation:
3. When did you join Sisters of _____?
4. Why did you join Sisters of _____?
5. Has your motivation for being a Sister changed or evolved?
6. Do you make a distinction between your religious and spiritual life? If so, please elaborate.

PART B
1. What is your current social work role?
2. How long have you been engaged in social work?
3. Can you give examples of some past roles?
4. What motivated you to become involved in this field?
5. Has your motivation to be in social work changed or evolved?

PART C
1. Could you share something particularly fulfilling or valuable about your current social work ministry?
2. Has being involved in social work influenced the way you think about yourself as a Sister or the way you practice your religion and/or spirituality?
3. Has your religious and/or spiritual life as a Sister influenced your practice of social work, in terms of attitudes, beliefs and/or behaviors?
4. Do you see any commonalities between the values, activities, and/or goals of social work and religious life?
5. Do you see any inherent conflicts between the values, activities, and/or goals of social work and religious life?
6. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant,

I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work and am currently conducting research on the perspectives and experiences of Catholic Sisters who are also social workers.

In order to participate you must identify as a Catholic Sister (and therefore be a member of any Catholic women's religious order or congregation) and be at least 25 years old. You must also have either a master's degree in social work or have worked for at least five years in the field of social work which includes (but is not necessarily limited to) activities such as "helping people obtain tangible services; counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes" (NASW, 2013).

Participation offers an opportunity to share personal experience and insight that can help advance the field in understanding if and how personal religious and spiritual roles relate to the practice of social work. This study seeks to explore how Catholic Sisters who engage in social work understand their experiences and view themselves in these two spheres. Further, the study asks if Sisters' dual roles in social work and religious life influence each other or overlap. Although compensation will not be provided, access to findings of the study will be available.

I will use this collection of data for the purposes of my Master's of Social Work (MSW) thesis and potentially for publication and presentation.

Participation in this study will include an interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes. In this interview I will ask about your background as a Sister and as a social worker, as well as a series of questions about your professional practice and your religious and/or spiritual beliefs. This is not an assessment of your organization or you, but an analysis of what trends and perspectives are identified by Sisters more broadly.

All information specific to you will remain confidential. No aspect of your participation will be discussed with any other respondent and no personal information about any respondent or religious order will be presented in a way that is clearly identifying in any of the documents resulting from the study.

I may request whether you are willing to pass along information about the research study to friends and/or family members who may also be interested in participation. You are under no obligation to share this information, and whether or not you share this information will not affect your relationship with me, the study's researcher, or Smith College.

If you are willing, please pass along information about this study to others who may be eligible and interested in participating. If you agree to participate, I will also ask you at the time of our interview if you know anyone who might be interested in participating and to pass along my contact information.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact me, Melissa Eells, at [removed] or by telephone at [removed].

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

      I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work and am currently conducting research on the perspectives and experiences of Catholic Sisters who are also social workers. I will use this collection of data for the purposes of my Master's of Social Work thesis and potentially for publication and presentation.

      As both a Sister and a social worker, you have valuable insight to share. This study seeks to explore how Catholic Sisters who are both social work professionals and religious professionals understand their experiences and view themselves in these two spheres. Further, the study asks if Sisters' dual roles in social work and religious life influence each other or overlap. Social work includes (but is not necessarily limited to) activities such as "helping people obtain tangible services; counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes" (NASW, 2013).

      Participation in this study would include an interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes in which I will ask about your background as a Sister and as a social worker as well as a series of questions about your professional practice and your religious and/or spiritual beliefs. This is not an assessment of you, your organization or your Order or Congregation, but an analysis of what trends and perspectives are identified by Sisters working in the field of social work more broadly.

      In order to participate you must identify yourself as a Catholic Sister (and therefore be a member of any Catholic religious Order or Congregation of women), and be at least 25 years old. You must also have either a Master's of Social Work or have worked in the field of social work for at least five years.

      With your permission I intend to audiotape the interview for the purpose of accuracy, and I will be the sole transcriber of this data. If you agree to the taping you will sign to indicate your consent at the end of this Informed Consent form. If you choose to not consent to taping, I will still seek your consent for the interview, but I will take notes by hand or by typing them into some form of lap-top during the process in order to record your responses accurately.

      I appreciate that working in the field of social work as well as being a religious Sister can be challenging as well as fulfilling. During the interview process, questions about your professional roles and personal religious and spiritual beliefs may feel sensitive or bring up feelings for you that are uncomfortable. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time during the interview without penalty. You will be also able to choose not to respond to any particular question, to respond superficially (i.e., answer in part or not in depth), or even to remove a previously answered question from the record during the interview. A list of free or low-cost counseling services available should you wish to seek counseling as a result of your participation are attached to this Informed Consent.

      Participation offers an opportunity to share personal experience and insight that can help advance the social work field in understanding how religion and spirituality can be incorporated into social work. Although compensation will not be provided, access to this study's findings will be available upon the completion of the study. I may request whether you are willing to pass along information about the research study to friends and/or family members who may also be interested in participation. You are under no obligation to share this information and whether or

not you share this information will not affect your relationship with me, the researcher, or with Smith College.

All information specific to you will remain confidential. To maintain confidentiality, I will limit the amount of identifying demographic information that is obtained through the interview process in any reports that emanate from the completed study, including my thesis document and any papers or publications that may arise from that report. Any information obtained regarding specific clients will remain confidential in the same manner   In the case of confidentiality and publications or presentations, findings will be presented as a whole and I will ensure that illustrative quotes and vignettes are carefully disguised. While my advisor will have access to the information gathered, she will not be made aware of identifying information pertaining to you, the participant. All notes and audio recordings will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by federal guidelines and electronic data will be protected. Should I require the materials beyond the three-year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and be destroyed when no longer needed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview process or choose not to answer any of the interview questions. You may also choose to withdraw up until two weeks after the interview. At the time of the interview we will identify the date after which I will begin analysis after which, therefore, you will no longer be able to withdraw your responses. Should you choose to withdraw from the study up until that date, any material pertaining to you and/or your organization will be destroyed. If you have any concerns about your rights or questions regarding any aspect of this study, please contact me Melissa Eells, at [removed] or by telephone at [removed] or the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

………………………………………………………………………………….
Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____   Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____   Date: _____
………………………………………………………………………………….
Consent to Audiotape
Please check one box:

□ 1. I DO agree to have this interview tape-recorded

□ 2. I agree to be interviewed, but I DO NOT AGREE to have the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____   Date: _____

Free or low-cost counseling services can be found through:

1.   The National Mental Health Association operates a toll-free line (1-800-969-6642) 9 am
        5 pm Mon-Fri and provides information on mental health topics and referrals.

2.   Detailed professional listings for Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Therapists, Counselors,
        Group Therapy and Treatment Centers in your local area can be found at:
        http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof_search.php

3.   The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offers 24 hour, immediate emotional support
        for individuals in crisis on their toll-free hotline (1-800-273-TALK).

APPENDIX D

Human Subjects Review Approval

SMITH COLLEGE

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

January 13, 2014

Melissa Eells

Dear Melissa,

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,

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

CC: Dominique Steinberg, Research Advisor