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Spiritually sensitive social work: Attitudes of Catholic Charities social workers¹

Introduction

Not long ago, spirituality and religion (S/R) were dismissed as outdated in social work (Holloway, Moss, 2010). While the global professional landscape has transformed in recent decades, there is limited empirical knowledge about the role of S/R in social work practice, mainly available from a few countries (Oxhandler et al., 2015; Canda, Furman, Canda, 2020; Zahl et al. 2007; Vetvik 2018; Stirling 2010).

This text aims to provide insights into the key aspects of this professional development related to the potential of S/R in social work practice, education, and research. It also presents two findings from the first-ever survey on the spiritual sensitivity of social workers in the Czech Republic.

Definition of Concepts: Spirituality, Religion, and Spiritual Sensitivity

Spirituality and religion (S/R) were historically disregarded in social work education and research during the 20th century, often seen as sources of conflict and oppression (Holloway, Moss, 2010; Canda, Furman, Canda 2020; Dudley, 2016). This attitude also influenced practice, where social workers would typically only address S/R issues when discrimination occurred.

In the last three decades, there has been a substantial increase in empirical knowledge about how S/R beliefs affect an individual's well-being (Koenig, King, Carson, 2012; Hodge, 2011), leading to a shift in interest within the global social work community (Turhan, 2023; Canda, Furman, Canda 2020; Gehrig et al., 2021; Kirst-Ashman, Hull, 2018). Sensitivity to S/R has become a core competency in social work education (IFSW, IASSW, 2004) and part of the ethical principles in the international code of ethics (IFSW, IASSW, 2018).

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This shift is tied to a change in the conceptual boundaries of spirituality and religion. They are now seen as overlapping but distinguishable. *Spirituality* involves search for meaning, values, and hope in one's own life and the way one experiences relationships with oneself, others, the world, and the ultimate, transcendent foundation of life, regardless of how it is conceived or named, religious or non-religious (Canda, Furman, Canda, 2020), while *religion* is often viewed as institutionalized and community-shared set of spiritually oriented beliefs, values, symbols, practices, and experiences (Hodge, Horvath, 2011). Spirituality is broader and more inclusive to many social workers compared to religion.

This inclusive understanding of spirituality is related to spiritual sensitivity, which encourages social workers to respect and explore clients' spirituality, religious or not, without necessarily using specific spiritual terminology. It involves a respectful, empathetic, and knowledge-based awareness of the client's spirituality at any relevant point in the helping process, particularly during assessment and intervention considerations.

Charity: Social Work Marked by Dilemma

Caritas (Catholic Charities) in the Czech Republic is the largest non-governmental provider of social services in the country and, therefore, an organizational environment for a significant portion of social work in the Czech Republic. While precise numbers are not available, it is estimated that there are approximately 1,500 social workers working in the network of charitable facilities and services. The identity of this Catholic and faith-based organization has had to combine two aspects since its establishment in 1922. On one hand, its practice is part of the religious belief of the Catholic Church (Benedict XVI, 2005), and on the other hand, its approach to clients must respect the value of their freedom, honor their own religious or non-religious beliefs, and therefore prohibits any form of proselytism and the imposition of faith and values of the (Catholic) Church (Caritas Czech Republic, 2020: art. 1.2). In terms of these theoretical parameters, Caritas - and to some extent, all faith-based organizations are in a similar position - faces the dilemma of a dual mandate: How to preserve the specific profile of organizational culture and services derived from a specific religious program (kerygma) without violating, and at least respecting, the autonomy of its clients in the realm of their S/R, and ideally, respecting, appreciating, and supporting it (Doležel, 2017).

Research Issues

We have limited knowledge about how Caritas agency social workers in the Czech Republic address this issue. Additionally, there is a lack of information about social workers in the broader population, regardless of their employer.

As part of an applied research project aimed at developing a policy for addressing the spiritual and religious diversity of clients in social work practice, we examined the extent and nature of spiritual sensitivity among social workers and

their attitudes towards incorporating it into their practice. Below, I will share two key research findings from this study.

Research Methods and Selected Research Findings

Research Sample

The research was conducted in the regional network of local Caritas agencies (Archdiocesan Charities Olomouc) that employed a total of 386 social workers in their services and facilities in 2021. Data were collected at the turn of 2021/2022 from 218 of them (ORR = 56.4%). Naturally, this chosen research sample has certain limitations, such as limited generalizability of findings to social workers across different employers. Additionally, due to the response rate, it cannot be ruled out that the results may be biased by the inclusion of only those respondents who resonate with the topic or, conversely, strongly oppose it.

Research Instrument

We adapted a questionnaire into Czech (using the standard back-translation method with the involvement of a native speaker) that had been previously used in surveys in different countries (Canda, Furman, 2021)². Respondents administered the questionnaire online (socialsurvey.eu).

Data Analysis

We examined the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Similar to the authors of the original questionnaire, we chose the scale measuring the appropriateness of discussing S/R topics with clients in specific life situations to test Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega (Canda, Furman, Canda, 2020). We analyzed the complete data in the statistical program R using packages such as corx, psychtoolbox, or psych (Conigrave, 2023; Novak, 2022; Revelle, 2020).

Internal Consistency of the Research Tool

The tested scale measuring the appropriateness of discussing *religion* reached Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega values of 0.98. In the case of the same scale with the topic of *spirituality*, Cronbach's alpha reached a value of 0.98, and McDonald's reached 0.99. Values higher than 0.8 for both measures are considered good (Feißt et al., 2019). The original questionnaire and its adaptation for studies in Norway, the UK, and New Zealand also showed similarly high levels of internal consistency (Canda, Furman, Canda, 2020).

2 Thanks to Leola Dyrud Furman, PhD (Associate Professor Emerita, University of North Dakota) and Edward R. Canda, PhD (Professor Emeritus, University of Kansas) for permission to use, adapt, and translate their survey instrument on The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice. Drs. Furman and Canda thank Dr. Michael Sheridan for permitting them to build on her pioneering survey work in developing their survey instruments.

Research Finding 1: Respondents' Trust in the Potential of S/R Topics for Practice

The scale measuring the appropriateness of discussing S/R topics with clients in specific life situations included a list of 21 enumerated life situations and client groups. Respondents expressed their opinion on a five-point Likert scale regarding whether it is appropriate to discuss the client's spirituality or religion in these situations. As evident in Table 1, social workers perceive the potential of these topics more strongly in some situations and less strongly in others. Additionally, it was shown that in all situations, workers consider the potential of the client's spirituality to be stronger than the potential of the client's religion, with statistically significant differences. These findings suggest that many social workers recognize the importance of S/R topics, and they consider distinguishing between them to be relevant in practice. The data also revealed a significant proportion of neutral or undecided workers.

Table 1. Respondents' Subjective Trust in the Potential of S/R Topics by Target Groups and Client Life Situations

„Is it appropriate for a social worker to open the topic of ... while working with a client who is...“	Religion ^a		Spirituality ^a	
	Agree ^b % (n)	Neutral % (n)	Agree ^b % (n)	Neutral % (n)
Terminal Stage of Illness	63.3(138)	27.98(61)	77.98(170)	16.51(36)
Bereavement	59.63(130)	30.28(66)	70.18(153)	22.48(49)
Consequences of Natural Disasters	37.16(81)	43.12(94)	54.13(118)	33.94(74)
Family Relationship Issues	32.11(70)	49.54(108)	51.38(112)	37.61(82)
Recovery from Sexual Abuse	30.28(66)	44.5(97)	49.08(107)	33.94(74)
Adoption Preparation	29.36(64)	44.5(97)	46.79(102)	39.45(86)
Experience of Partner Violence	28.44(62)	44.5(97)	50(109)	33.94(74)
Foster Care Preparation	27.98(61)	45.87(100)	46.79(102)	39.45(86)
Child Development Challenges	27.06(59)	50.46(110)	49.08(107)	38.07(83)
Mental Health Disorders	21.56(47)	46.79(102)	40.37(88)	38.07(83)
Substance Abuse	20.64(45)	51.83(113)	51.83(113)	34.4(75)
Criminal Proceedings	20.18(44)	50.38(112)	37.16(81)	47.71(104)
Job Loss	18.81(41)	51.38(112)	41.74(91)	44.04(96)

„Is it appropriate for a social worker to open the topic of ... while working with a client who is...“	Religion ^a		Spirituality ^a		
	Client groups	Agree ^b % (n)	Neutral % (n)	Agree ^b % (n)	Neutral % (n)
„...experiences discrimination due to...“					
Religious belief	67.43(147)	24.77(54)	70.18(153)	22.94(50)	
Ethnic origin	31.19(68)	47.25(103)	47.71(104)	38.99(85)	
Disability	30.28(66)	46.79(102)	46.79(102)	38.07(83)	
Poverty	27.98(61)	47.25(103)	45.87(100)	39.91(87)	
Gender	20.64(45)	53.21(116)	43.58(95)	41.28(90)	
Sexual orientation	17.89(39)	50.46(110)	45.41(99)	38.53(84)	
Age	16.97(37)	55.96(122)	42.2(92)	42.2(92)	
Political belief	15.6(34)	55.05(120)	38.07(83)	43.12(94)	
Note: a Wilcoxon’s test revealed differences in the perception of the appropriateness of spirituality and religion in all client groups and life situations as statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), except for the situation of clients discriminated against due to religious belief. b Values of „Strong Disagree” and „Agree” were combined.					

Research Finding 2: The Reality and Ideal of Spiritually Sensitive Interventions

Another tool for testing the spiritual sensitivity of respondents was a set of 21 helping activities, spiritually sensitive interventions, where workers recorded which ones they personally used with clients and whether they considered them suitable for social work. Table 2 shows that all tested activities to some extent already exist in the practice of Czech social workers, although some more than others, and overall, except for two interventions, they are not widespread among respondents. It is also noteworthy that at the top of the spiritually sensitive practices of respondents are activities in which the worker relies on the expertise of specialists. On the other hand, interventions that only occur between the client and the worker, or only with the worker - such as private meditation as preparation for a meeting with the client - are not used in practice by even half of the respondents. The key finding in this part of the data is that without exception, all evaluated interventions are considered more suitable for practice by the majority of respondents than they actually use in their own practice. In many activities, there were multiple differences.

Table 2. Real Practice and Subjective Trust in Spiritually Sensitive Interventions

Intervention	Have personally done		Consider as appropriate	
	%	n	%	n
Collaboration with a spiritual or other religious/spiritual guide	61,47	134	84,40	184
Referring the client to a spiritual or other religious/spiritual guide	55,05	120	77,52	169
Encouraging the client to draw from their religious/spiritual support system and engage in related activities	49,54	108	69,72	152
Assisting the client in considering how their religious/spiritual support system helps them	46,33	101	71,56	156
Private prayer for the client	44,5	97	58,72	128
Assisting the client in reflecting on the spiritual meaning and purpose of their current life situation	38,99	85	62,39	136
Engaging in private meditation as part of preparing for client sessions	32,11	70	56,88	124
Discussing with the client the role of their religious or spiritual beliefs in relation to their loved ones	30,73	67	54,13	118
Assisting the client in reflecting on their beliefs about what happens after death	29,36	64	56,88	124
Using or recommending religious/spiritual literature	26,15	57	55,96	122
Helping the client critically assess their religious or spiritual beliefs or activities	23,85	52	50,46	110
Providing professional interventions that help the client create religious/spiritual rituals (e.g., blessing the home, visiting relatives' graves, celebrating rites of passage)	22,94	50	49,54	108
Engaging in joint prayer with the client	22,48	49	58,72	128
Using religious terminology and concepts	21,56	47	33,49	73
Assisting the client in considering how their religious/spiritual support system may be harmful to them	20,18	44	50,46	110
Participating in the client's religious/spiritual rituals as part of an intervention	19,27	42	39,91	87

Intervention	Have personally done		Consider as appropriate	
	%	n	%	n
Using non-religious spiritual language and concepts	18,81	41	33,03	72
Touching the client for „healing“ purposes	17,43	38	22,48	49
Engaging in joint meditation with the client	9,17	20	40,83	89
Assisting the client in evaluating the significance of spiritual experiences that arise in dreams	7,34	16	23,39	51
Encouraging the client to keep a regular religious/spiritual self-reflective journal	2,75	6	31,35	69

Discussion

The data provides a limited insight into the integration of spiritual sensitivity among Czech social workers. While there's need for further exploration and statistical analysis, our focus here is not to compare it with foreign studies. The findings suggest that practical experience with spiritual/religious integration is relatively low among Czech social workers, with many holding cautious positions. However, some are already working with the S/R domain to some extent, and this may expand under suitable conditions.

It's important to note that not all social workers exhibit the same level of caution regarding spirituality and religion; they differentiate between the broader concept of spirituality and religion in their clients' lives, depending on target groups and interventions. This underscores the need to distinguish between these concepts in clinical practice.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following:

1. Incorporate spiritually sensitive social work into the education of social work students, e.g. in social work methods courses. This ensures that this aspect of clients' lives is not neglected or integrated unethically.
2. Provide practical support materials (manuals) for practicing social workers, offer resources for practice supervision, develop relevant continuing education courses, and assess their effectiveness in enhancing spiritual sensitivity in practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of spirituality and religion in social work is growing, both globally and in the Czech Republic. Recent research shows the need for further development in this area, emphasizing the importance of respecting diversity, taking a holistic approach, and prioritizing client beliefs.

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Abstract

The article explores the evolving role of spirituality and religion (S/R) in social work, focusing on the attitudes of social workers in the Czech Republic. It provides definition of key concepts and two selected research findings from the survey among social workers (n=218) in Czech Caritas agencies. Respondents recognized the potential of discussing S/R topics with clients in various life situations, with spirituality being perceived as more relevant than religion. Spiritually sensitive interventions are already present in the practice of Czech social workers to some extent, but they are considered more suitable for practice than what is currently implemented. Recommendations include incorporating spiritual sensitivity into social work education and providing practical resources for practicing social workers.

Keywords: Spiritual sensitivity. Ethics. Social Work. Spirituality.

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