

Integrating Faith and Practice: A Qualitative Study of Staff Motivations

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Social work courses at all levels are filled with young women and men who aspire to join the profession to put their Christian faith into practice. For them, the profession is a noble calling in which they can deliver the love of God to their clients through knowledgeable, caring, and evidence-based services to address the physical, psychological, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of the people they feel called to serve. Such an understanding of the social work profession is not outside the bounds of ethical practice. Unfortunately, these same passionate students are all too often told by professors and supervisors to suspend their religious beliefs while working with clients. This advice from professors is in the interest of promoting ethical practice and client self-determination. However, it is possible to professionally connect with clients through well-honed beliefs about faith without imposing religion on clients. This paper shares the characteristics of six mental health professionals who ethically integrate their faith into their practice of helping women leave the sex industry at a faith-based, nonprofit agency. Interviews were conducted by three of the authors from this study. Phenomenology guided the interview process to describe and explore participants' lived experiences and what these experiences mean to them.

ACCORDING TO A STUDY BY MATTISON, JAYARATNE AND CROXTON (2008), a majority of direct practice social workers in the United States who are NASW members ascribe to the Christian faith. Of those who cite their faith as important in their lives, social work practice is often viewed as an opportunity to deliver the love of God to their clients

through both religious and non-religious services that address the physical, psychosocial, emotional, and spiritual needs of the people they feel called to serve (Chamiec-Case, 2007; Kuilema, 2014). Such an understanding of the social work profession is not outside the bounds of ethical practice. Indeed, the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) states only that social workers uphold clients' rights to self-determination (1.03) and practice cultural competence with clients' religious beliefs (1.05); nowhere does the code suggest that social workers' religious beliefs must be compartmentalized and entirely removed from practice settings. Unfortunately, religiously minded social workers are often told by professors and supervisors to suspend their faith while working with clients in the interest of ethical practice and client self-determination (Canda, 2009; Ressler & Hodge, 2003). This occurs because religious faith has, at times, led to unethical practice, such as when a social worker's religious beliefs infringe upon clients' rights to self-determination (Jenkins & Johnston, 2004).

However, there remains an enormous strength within social workers who can connect with their clients through their faith, whether faith-informed words are spoken or not (Canda, Nakashima & Furman, 2004). It is regrettable that social work education and discourse is largely neglectful, or downright hostile, to the question of how Christian social workers can integrate their faith and practice (Streets, 2009). Incorporating faith, including the Christian faith, into social work education and discourse helps social workers become more self-aware of their beliefs, worldviews, and sense of calling, and deeply thoughtful about ethical boundaries (Sherwood, 1999). Those social workers who gain self-awareness are, in fact, following the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) mandate to "obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . religion" (1.05). Too often, though, these conversations are avoided within social work education and professional development. Ethical concerns then arise about licensed social workers who lack training on how to integrate their faith using self-awareness (Sheridan, 2009). Another concern is that of the educational system that may overlook the source of core strength and resilience among social work practitioners of faith (Canda, 2009).

It is quite possible, however, for professors, social workers, and social work supervisors to view faith as a professional asset rather than an ethical liability. In this study, we examine how the staff members of one Christian faith-based, non-profit agency that serves women exiting the sex industry have enhanced the agency's services through the integration of Christian faith and practice, rather than in spite of it.

This particular agency's executive leadership places a high value on staff members who know how to integrate their Christian faith and practice in a compassionate manner. In fact, executive leadership notes that ethical Christian social workers and other mental health professionals are core to

program success. Findings from a previous study of the clients served by this agency reveal that client satisfaction regarding programming was based on their relationships with the staff and their ability to psychosocially and spiritually build trust with the clients (Preble, 2015; Preble, Praetorius & Cimino, 2016).

In this study, we define the integration of Christian faith and practice as a social worker's 1) Christian faith-informed motivation to provide services to clients; 2) ability to discuss a client's faith when the client desires to do so; 3) application of the Christian and social work value of the dignity and worth of all persons to their individual caseloads; and 4) belief that God is involved in the healing process of each client. This social work practice appropriately addresses the spiritual and religious needs and resources of clients without imposing the social worker's beliefs or values or exploiting the clients' vulnerability. This definition does not include religiously-based direct practice interventions. For instance, social workers at the agency do not regularly engage in prayer with clients, although prayer could be understood as one form of integrated faith and practice. If social workers pray with clients, it is because the client asks for prayer and directs the social worker towards her specific prayer needs. Because this activity and others like it are not directed by the social worker, we do not emphasize this or similar religiously-based direct practice interventions a part of our definition of integrated faith and practice (except as a natural extension of the second component of our definition).

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to learn more about the staff at the agency where this study was conducted to ascertain how some Christian social workers have incorporated their faith and practice, and what could be used in further developing, recruiting, and retaining these effective staff members. We did so by examining two different lines of research questions. The purpose of our research was to both better understand how Christian social workers integrate their faith and practice, and to better understand how Christian faith-based agencies can retain the employees who do it well. First, we studied the characteristics of Christian faith-motivated direct practice staff members, most of whom are licensed social workers or counselors, in order to ascertain how they view the integration of faith and practice. Then, because this agency and others like it aspire to recruit and retain this type of staff, we 1) analyzed the inspiration of these faith-motivated staff members, and 2) investigated the job characteristics that encourage them to stay in the agency, as well as those job characteristics that may encourage them to seek employment elsewhere. The results of this study provide transferrable information to other Christian social workers who are interested in integrating their faith and practice, as well as recommendations for how agencies can recruit, develop, and retain these effective staff members.

Literature Review

The social work profession was initially established as an extension of its founders' Christian values to serve impoverished and disempowered human beings. From the profession's early charitable volunteers in settlement houses like Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, early social workers were motivated by their religious beliefs, and committed to integrating their faith into their practice with clients (Seyfried, 2007; Tennanbaum & Reisch, 2001). Following social work's early years, however, the profession began to place a heavy emphasis on interventions grounded in the social science of the day and psychoanalytic theory, in an effort to increase the profession's mainstream credibility (Senreich, 2013).

The ethical mandate to practice empirically sound interventions, as stated in section 5.02 of the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), was a wise one. The scientific emphasis of current social work education and practice, however, is one that has frequently had the effect of pushing faith to the margins of social workers' and clients' relationships (Gilligan & Furness, 2006; Sheridan & Amato von-Hemert, 1999; Streets, 2009). This remains true, despite the reality that the majority of practicing social workers still believe that the integration of faith and services is at least sometimes appropriate (Gilligan & Furness, 2006), and the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) standards require that social workers should be prepared to address a client's spiritual and religious concerns throughout holistic assessment and intervention (CSWE, 2015; Senreich, 2013; Seyfried, 2007).

It is odd that there is a disconnect between social workers' beliefs about faith and practice and the profession's insufficient response toward equipping social workers to do so in an ethical and competent way. Indeed, there is ample evidence that social workers are integrating their religious beliefs into practice in spite of their lack of education. Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert (1999) found, for instance, that social worker "respondents revealed a positive stance toward the role of religion and spirituality in social work practice," and that a majority of respondents supported the use of "religious or spiritually oriented interventions as appropriate for social work practice," which is a matter of concern since most of the study's participants indicated very little knowledge of how to do so from their formal education (p. 138-139). As a result of these findings and the dearth of social work educational textbooks devoted to spiritual integration in practice (Rosenbohm, 2011), it is reasonable to believe that most of the social workers who attempt to integrate faith and practice do so without effective training, and with insufficient understanding of the ethical implications of integrating their faith with practice (Senreich, 2013). In 2007, Graff conducted a survey of 324 baccalaureate social work students in the state of Texas and findings corroborated these ideas. The most compelling finding was that of the students who

integrate faith into all aspects of their lives, 62.7% believe it is appropriate to integrate faith into their practice, pray with clients, and talk about faith, despite no social work education on how to do so ethically. Graff (2007) also noted that many students in this sample reported relatively fundamentalist religious beliefs and concluded, "Social work educators need to be aware of these potentially strong and even possibly rigid religious/spiritual beliefs to provide a forum for discussion of such issues to promote ethical practice" (p. 252). If social work professionals are not trained on culturally and professionally appropriate use of religion and spirituality in practice, this relationship between untrained religious and spiritual integration into practice could prove to be problematic and oppressive for clients.

Some leaders within the profession have taken note of these critiques, and have encouraged a professional return to the importance of spirituality, faith, and religious belief as a domain for client assessment and intervention (Bullis, 2013). Indeed, the undefined and mysterious space in which the client and social worker interact with spirituality and faith, whether religious words are exchanged or not, is cited as a location in which the social worker and client could develop rapport, cultivate strength, and perhaps, as Preble, Praetorius, and Cimino (2016) found, serve as the cornerstone for client trust towards the social worker.

In 2010, Barker and Floersch found that their sample of 20 social workers with more than three years of post-MSW experience agreed that faith-based or spiritual practices could be an active process for individuals to create meaning and purpose, especially in times of need and crisis. Sermabeikian (1994) expands this thought by imploring social workers to recognize that a client's spirituality is a strength to access as a "constructive way of facing life's difficulties" (p. 181).

The question, then, is how social workers ought to do so. Barker and Floersch (2010) stated: "Much as we provide language for other concepts important to social work, such as social justice or diversity, social work education has a responsibility to provide comprehensive spirituality language that is useful in preparing effective social workers" (p. 364). Here, the argument is clear that social work education should train professionals about the concepts of spirituality in order to serve populations in need with the most culturally competent approach.

For the sake of this exploratory study, we posed the question of how Christian social workers can integrate faith and practice, and what motivates them to continue doing so, to a group of Christian social workers and mental health professionals in a faith-based agency that helps women leave the sex industry. We used an exploratory qualitative approach to examine what makes these professionals engage in their difficult work, how they integrated their faith into their work, and the workplace conditions that encourage or exasperate their desire to stay involved in the work.

Method

Prior to conducting the study, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for the protection of human subjects. The study was part of a service-learning project in a doctoral level qualitative research class. Three of the authors (Hohn, Ude, and Ivey) were part of this class and conducted the interviews, analyses and composed a portion of this manuscript to meet class requirements. The community partner was a faith-based organization in the southern United States that helped women leave the sex industry.

Phenomenology guided the development of interview questions as well as the interview processes. We considered this an appropriate strategy because Creswell (2007) emphasized that phenomenology was a qualitative approach used to describe and explore participants' lived experiences and what these experiences mean to them. The overarching questions focused on what makes these professionals engage in their difficult work, how they integrate their faith into their work, and the workplace conditions that encourage or exasperate their desire to stay involved in the work.

Program Description

The faith-based agency provides services to women who are leaving the sex industry by providing the women and their children with access to education, job training, interim financial assistance, mental health services and spiritual support. Since its inception in 1997, the agency has provided services to more than 1,100 women and their children.

Data Collection

Participants. Six staff members were invited to participate in this study. The staff were an equal balance of majority and minority race. They held different positions in the agency, all interacting directly with clients. All of the participants were females between the ages of 20 and 40. The average length of employment was one year; and their education ranged from undergraduate to graduate degrees in social work. To keep the staff identities confidential, their names were changed and certain identifying details were omitted, such as their education.

Procedures. Six open-ended questions were designed in collaboration with an agency administrator to collect data from the staff:

1. What does success look like when a woman graduates the program?
2. What brought you to this work?
3. What role does faith play in your interventions?

4. How do you integrate faith with the women (give an example)?
5. What makes you stay?
6. What makes you want to leave?

Excluding question one, the questions were utilized to gain more understanding about how the staff members integrate faith and why they want to stay or leave the agency. Question one was asked first to build rapport since it is often easier to talk about others than oneself. Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour, face-to-face. Authors Hohn, McCoy, and Ivey each conducted two interviews. The interviews occurred at the agency and each participant was interviewed in a private room for confidentiality and privacy purposes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to highlight themes regarding the integration of faith into social work practice.

Data Analysis

The authors who conducted the interviews coded them; coding was guided by the systematic approach outlined in grounded theory through open and axial coding processes. Upon completion of the first interview, the authors who conducted interviews met as a team and reviewed their coding to achieve triangulation of analysis. Ideas began to emerge as we discussed similarities and differences in the first three interviews. Then we separately coded the last three interviews and subsequently met to bring new ideas to the table and reformulate the overall themes.

In addition to triangulation of analysts, credibility was enhanced through triangulation of sources and theories (Patton, 1999). We triangulated our sources by conducting interviews with more than one staff member (Patton). Triangulation of theories refers to the merging of different methods of qualitative research, interpretation, and analysis (Patton). We merged the phenomenological method of data collection and design with the systematic manner of data analysis informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). With this approach, each interview was coded into independent ideas, merged into larger themes, and finally revised into concise representation of each theme.

Researchers' Credibility

As Patton (1999) explained, all researchers should report their qualifications for conducting qualitative research in order to expose biases and strengths of the team for a more robust and transparent vision of the study for the reader. The experience the researcher brings during a qualitative research study is imperative as it affects the research result or finding's interpretation of results (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillion, 1996; Patton, 1999).

Kris Hohn. I am qualified to engage in this study about staff experiences working with trauma victims and faith integration due to several years of qualitative training, two years of nonprofit work, and a variety of faith-based research projects. As a trained MSW social worker and doctoral student, my experiences inform a professional systematic approach to collect, interpret, and report accurate information. Additionally, I have extensive knowledge about women exiting the sex industry and victims of sex trafficking. I am certain that my in-depth knowledge about individuals who engage in sex work and my practiced method of interviewing and coding research added greatly to this study. I fully acknowledge my biased attitudes against individuals who force, enslave, and abuse people through sex work, but I am confident that our team of researchers provided continuity across our experiences and preconceptions.

Mary McCoy. I am a licensed MSW social worker and a social work doctoral student. Prior to returning to school for my doctoral degree, I worked for five years as a direct practice case manager in crisis intervention, medical social work, and finally as a case manager for women exiting sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. In addition to my direct practice experiences in both secular and faith-based organizations, I also worked for three years as a macro level social worker and program evaluator in a faith-based international disaster relief non-profit. My personal bias stems from my experiences in hearing the stories and challenges of women who have been sexually exploited and trafficked, as well as my Christian faith and my deep commitment to the dignity and worth of all persons, but particularly those who have experienced exploitation. Despite this bias, I am committed to reporting study results exactly as I find them, as it is my responsibility to do so.

Dorothea Ivey. I hold an MSW and am pursuing a doctoral degree in social work. I have over ten years of experience in research and evaluation for programs serving disadvantaged populations. Two of those years of experience have been involved in research on populations involved in the sex industry and another 10 years in nonprofit administration—all in collaboration with faith-based organizations. I fully

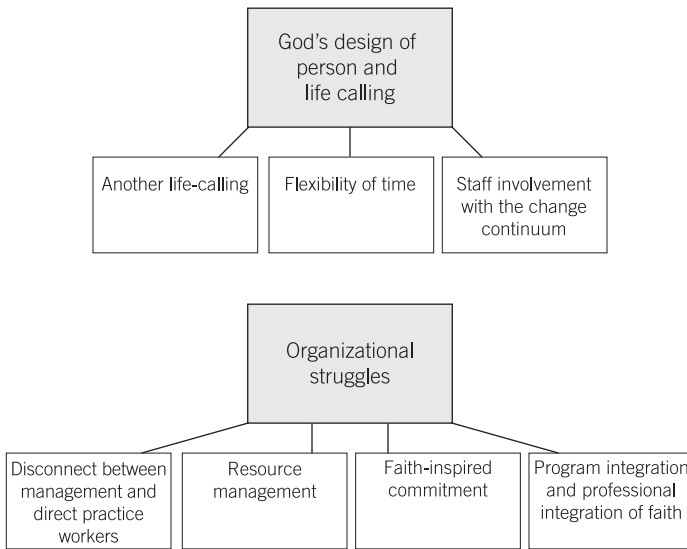
recognize and acknowledge my biases toward individuals who force others into the sex industry for various reasons; however, I am confident that this research collaboration team made a strong connection and balanced responsibilities for a robust study.

Paula Ugochukwu Ude. My research interests are in mental health, program development, and evaluation. I am trained and professed as a Catholic Sister. I am also a licensed MSW level social worker and social work doctoral student. For over 20 years, I worked in faith-based organizations that provided services to women who faced persistent social, economic, and spiritual problems. I understand that personal bias and being a Catholic Sister may affect my views, conceptualization, and interpretations of the results; however, my responsibility is to ensure objectivity diligently.

Regina T. Praetorius. I taught the qualitative course in which this study was a service-learning project. I originated the partnership with the agency with which I have worked for several years for the project. I oversaw the study's administration, trained the students in qualitative methods, and supervised data collection and analyses. Finally, because each of the first three authors developed their own versions of the method, results, and discussion sections of this manuscript for the purposes of the class, I took each of their versions and merged these into a succinct description of the study.

Results

Two overarching themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme was God's Design of Person and Life Calling. This theme is composed of three subthemes: 1) Another Lie Calling, 2) Flexibility of Time and Schedule, and 3) Staff Involvement with the Change Continuum. The second overarching theme was Faith-Based Organizations' Struggles. The two subthemes were 1) Issues Common to Most Organizations: Disconnect Between Management and Direct Practice Workers and Resource Management, and 2) Faith-Inspired Commitment: Program integration and Professional integration of faith. See Figure 1 on the next page.



God's Design of Person and Life Calling

The first overarching theme emerged when interviewees reflected on the impact of God's plan for them, how His design guided their lives, as well as their sense of calling to the mission of their organization. Ashley reflected on her experiences and the affirmative calling she felt:

There is some overlap between my experiences and the experiences that some of the women have. And so... the first time that I started [working with the agency] and saw how I could help, and...I knew that I wanted to be here.

Casey brought her belief in God's design on her life trajectory:

I was designed to care and to walk in relationships with people and how it just turned out this way... I think God somehow...I think no matter what I chose, it would have still been an okay choice, a right choice, so to speak. But, he is still working in the midst of what I am choosing and still working in the midst of how I was designed characteristic-wise and heart-wise.

Other interviewees interpreted God's influence in the inexplicable connections made that led them to their life's calling. Kathy, for example, stated:

I say, God sent me here, because, I mean, I never even knew where the agency was. I didn't know anything, no one else

has ever said anything, and then here pop, here they pop up. And, honestly, I think I put my résumé out on the job [market], but I didn't fill out an application until after I was hired. So my husband was like, that's got to be God.

Another life-calling. When some interviewees reflected on the issues that make them question their long-term plans with the agency, one clear message arose from a statement made by Casey:

I think when it is time for me to leave, whenever that is, it will be for the right reasons. And the right reasons will be that I feel led in a different direction about helping other people...And so at some point it may be because my focus is just changing. That for a little while it was work, for a little while it's going to be family, and then it may be work again.

Flexibility of time. The flexibility of an organization to embrace the needs of the staff and allow for diverse work schedules worked both for and against their desire to stay with the organization. Ashley for example talked about her appreciation of her status:

I don't know if it is this way for other staff people, but the fact that it is [flexible] for me, and I [have a child]. That's really helpful to me, to be able to have some flexibility.

From a different perspective, Cindy, a full-time employee stated:

The only thing I think, as far as wanting to leave, ...you know, I have to use my vacation hours, or I have to work additional hours to have that time off, which I don't know the agency that will just give a person off.

Staff involvement with the change continuum. A powerful reason that makes the interviewees want to stay with their organization or inspires their work is their involvement with the change process. Tammy stated, "Seeing transformation in these women's lives is empowering to me and it's refreshing to me. And it lets me know that God is at work." As Kathy sought to find a workplace that embraced her faith-based lens, she explained, "I just prayed, I want something else meaningful, something where I can use my skills, my gifts, my talents to make a difference in someone else's, life like a huge difference." While balancing the weight of the work that needs to be done, Casey reflected:

Some days it's like I'm burnt out and they tell me that I'm valued, and that makes me stay. There are times that I stay because the work is so fulfilling that...you see a change in a person and you see, um, them overcome so much that it

is just so fulfilling. It's, selfishly speaking, so fulfilling to be able to see them grow and see how much they have changed from the first day you met them to where they are at today. So, and in that sense, it is definitely worth staying.

In reflecting on the strength of the women seeking help, Sheila examined their resilience when she stated:

The awareness of who they are as strong individuals, and the strength that has not only taken them to not only endure what they endure, but to decide I don't have to stay here, all of that has been enhanced to the point to where they are strong independent women now. Seeing any kind of improvement is a motivation to want to do more and to help more people.

Organizational Struggles

The second overarching theme emerged as interviewees explained not only the common management and financial issues faced by many nonprofits today, but also the unique experiences of being a professional person of faith.

Issues Common to Most Organizations. This theme originated from the reflections on the complicated levels of communication between direct practice workers and management. Additionally, financial strains impacted the staff perspectives on the agencies stability and mission.

Disconnect between Management and Direct Practice Workers. This theme originated from the reflections on the disconnect between direct practice workers and management. Additionally, financial strains impacted the staff perspectives on the agencies stability and mission.

Several interviewees reflected on the disconnect between different levels along the organizational hierarchy. Ashley stated:

There is a little bit of a disconnect between some of the management and knowing actually what's happening, especially in the [department], because that work down there gets crazy... But I don't think the management knows how many people are coming through down there. And I don't think they understand how it is to triage all those people, their needs, and to serve them well.

Cindy expanded on this when she explained:

There is often a great difference in what things are said and what things are really happening. And there is a lot of focus

on things looking good, and making sure that things seem right, instead of putting the energy into having the best we can have for the people that we serve.

Resource Management. The limitations of financial resources in the nonprofit world emerged through the analysis. Tammy specified: "I would love to [stay with the organization] but being that this is a nonprofit organization the funds may not be there." Ashley expressed the distribution of the resources in conflict with the slow change process when she stated:

[There are] other indicators of success that I think are more important, than doing [therapy] quickly, uh, yeah. So, there's this conflict, that I feel whenever we sit down to budget meetings and we talk about money women are getting every month, and how quickly they are progressing through the program. You know, we talk about advocacy as a long-term program, and it is, it's like two and a half years. But I just feel like there is this watchfulness over how quickly it is happening. It's really hard.

Faith-Inspired Commitment. Organizational issues related to faith also emerged. This theme originated from the staffs' willingness to continue on with the organization regardless of some hardship in the workplace. It shows how they felt empowered to continue on in their work. Tammy stated:

I want to be a part of this work. I feel like it is important. I feel like it is life changing not only for the women but for us as well. And I notice that working in the church and working here. I enjoy working here more.

Further, Casey reflected on the challenges faced by the spiritual leader who works with the women:

She really gets everyone to really ask hard questions, and to do the work in thinking it through, rather than them being told it, um, from somebody else's perspective. And so that's something that we all try to do on different levels of helping them to make some of those decisions, so they are adopting it as their truth. And so those are some of the things that I think {name} really works hard on Wednesday night. It's really engaging the discussion, versus just teaching. So, as far as faith is concerned it's really um...and also challenging them to see things maybe a little bit differently than what their circumstances kind of created as a belief.

Program integration and professional integration of faith. As devout religious believers and licensed professionals, the women reflected on

how they negotiate these identities. They discussed the balance between reflection and intention. Ashley stated:

I always hold my faith in my mind. I kind of hold it close to me and I don't bring it up unless somebody wants to go there. Because, um, I think that's important. A lot of women do want to go there. So, at that point, I will ask a lot of questions about what they believe. But I believe that a lot of my faith can kind of show through without me even saying anything about it. But just in the way that I let them ask the questions about God that they would be afraid to ask, uh, otherwise, like in a church-setting or whatever. So, it's really important to me to let my relationship with these women to be a place to say like whatever they want to say about God. Uh, it's really important to me, to know that I can handle it, that God can handle it. So, it's always in the back of my mind, but it doesn't always come out of my mouth.

Cindy expanded on this experience when she stated:

It wasn't until I really got settled in here that I realized that my faith is a part of what I do here every day, and it was every other day that I was a [licensed professional], it just wasn't at the forefront of what I was doing with the professional work. It was just like, that is my profession, here is my faith, here is my family; and my family and faith. It was totally separate because in so many places it wasn't a part of that out loud. It is with your own relationship with Christ but it is not something that people pray before staff meeting and pray with clients if they asked you to or they wanted, it wasn't ever like that before.

Kathy discussed how her professional and faith identity do come together during group and supporting prayer:

And we pray; every woman there with us; at staff meetings, we are praying for the women, we are praying for different things that happened, for God to move. And then even if, like if I'm having a day when issues, like, I'm tired, I'm drained, I've been dealing with this particular situation with a woman, and I'm praying about it, I don't just know which way to go, one of my co-workers will just grab my hand and pray with me right there. That to me, is faith-based, not just to say we were faith-based because we were started by a church.

Discussion

While there is a wealth of knowledge available for social service providers to use in the debate regarding integration of religion and spirituality in practice, there is a gap in the literature regarding staff perspectives on this issue. Most studies focus on the clients' evaluations or outcome scores, and not how the staff experienced the integration of faith into their practice. The overall findings of this study suggest that the faith-based organization and staff investigated ascribe closely to the framework of their Christian beliefs, compelled forward by their faith in God. Specifically, the theme of God's design of person and life calling represents how the staff members explored their beliefs in God's plan for their lives as well as how they are called to working with this population that makes them want to stay at the agency.

The theme of Faith-Based Organizations' Struggles demonstrates how the staff reflected on the barriers to both communication and financial stability. It highlights how they felt empowered, not only by being able to watch their clients grow, but also by having the freedom to incorporate their faith with their practice to connect with women and God.

Though staff explored complications common to nonprofit organizations such as management to direct practice disconnection and financial disputes, unique to faith-based organizations were their reflections on how they integrated and mediated the merging of their religious and professional paradigms. A religious paradigm may urge staff to focus on religious texts and teachings and to frame interactions with a client within that lens. A professional paradigm, such as social work, may require a person-centered approach, obligating the practitioner to allow the client to set goals, lead the direction of their collaboration, and refer to religious aspects of healing at the client's discretion. The unique blending of these lenses was successful with this specific agency and with this population.

As participant Ashley said, "I let them ask the questions about God that they would be afraid to ask...like in a church setting or whatever. So, it's really important to me to let my relationship with these women to be a place to say like whatever they want to say about God." She viewed her relationship with her clients as a place where they could relearn the value of their own thoughts and beliefs; that God could still love them even in the throes of doubt, questioning, and anger; that the compassion of God could be manifested in a relationship, even when the client's previous relationships (particularly those experienced as a result of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation) had been a source of grave harm. For her, the merging of religious and professional identities was a sacred act of faith.

To summarize another staff member's reflection, they have to be careful not to attempt to replace the women's pimps by trying to control what the women believed and imposing their religious teachings, since doing

so would likely harm rather than help the clients. For these professional social workers, then, a client's right to self-determination was seen as both a religious and ethical mandate. There was no delineation between what the social worker was required to do professionally and religiously; the NASW (2008) ethical standard of client self-determination (1.03) was seamlessly incorporated into how the social workers interpreted their religious obligations. This is an excellent example of social worker competence, which is a core ethical principle of the profession (NASW, 2008).

There is an ongoing discussion about whether or how social workers should integrate spirituality into their social services with clients, especially since spirituality can influence all systems of an individual (Hill & Donaldson, 2012). Some argue the importance of integrating faith into social service programming to provide more holistic care to clients, while others argue that this would infringe on client's rights. For example, Sager (2011) viewed the idea of integrating one's personal faith into practice with clients as an idea that would impact clients' lives positively and holistically. Contrastingly, Crisp (2011) argued that, "praying with clients is typically deemed to be professionally inappropriate" (p. 667). Other research indicates that the debate is not so clearly dichotomous. As Hodge and Horvath (2011) report, there are clients who want to have faith integrated into their services but their mental health practitioners do not fulfill this desire. Modesto, Weaver, and Flannelly (2006) found, however, that social workers do reflect on the clients' religion and religious involvement and the clients' perceptions of religious support in the community. One could argue, based upon this small exploratory study's findings, then, that it is not that some social workers do not integrate faith into practice, but instead aid in helping the client find those resources if desired. The nature of integration should vary considerably, depending on competent assessment of the client's needs and appropriate respect for client self-determination. Additional research is needed to gain a full understanding of how social workers both view and practice the ethical integration of their faith with their interventions.

Implications

Emergent themes provide support for the empowering nature of faith within the staff members interviewed. Their ability to connect with the agency's mission and other staff members through their faith constructed a foundation of empowerment and self-healing. Since many service providers struggle with burnout when working with stressful cases, the participants revealed that faith could be a method of decreasing and eliminating fatigue.

Agencies that employ social workers with a Christian faith motivation ought to be keenly aware that faith-based or spiritual supports may protect against employee burnout, and should perhaps consider these supports

an important component of an employee retention plan. Staff mentioned flexible schedules for self-care, relationship maintenance, and support from colleagues as particularly protective. Leadership should acknowledge that these staff members may respond less to traditional employee reward systems like promotions, raises, and excellent benefits, and more to flexibility and relationships. Further research should explore the specific types of benefits that are most likely to lead to the recruitment and retention of Christian faith-motivated social work staff.

Furthermore, as social work education systems struggle over how to professionally and appropriately integrate religion and spirituality, educators and supervisors can begin by practicing self-reflection. When social work educators and supervisors emphasize the value of self-reflection, they may encourage the same in their students or staff. For example, Barker and Floersch (2010) provided an assessment tool that can be used to help students and rising professionals understand their spiritual and religious context and how that influences their interpretation of the world around them. This is one step of many to help social workers build awareness of their biases, prejudices, and conceptualization of their life meanings. Further research should assess how an educator's or supervisor's emphasis on student or staff self-reflection influences beliefs about the integration of faith and practice.

Conclusion

Previous studies have shown that social work practitioners lack professional training on spirituality and ethical decision-making (Canda, et. al., 2009). The educational policy and accreditation standards, as established by the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE), support the importance of addressing the integration of spirituality in social work education. It specifically states from a human behavior perspective that social workers should apply theories and knowledge to better understand spiritual development. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) does not specifically support spirituality in social work practice but broadly addresses it as cultural competence in the social work profession. Sections 1.05(a-c) of the NASW code of ethics make implications on cultural competence from human behavior, societal, and diversity perspectives.

It is possible for professors, social workers, and social work supervisors to view faith as a professional asset rather than an ethical liability. On the contrary, it is also a possible option for social workers to avoid spiritual and religious issues altogether and refer clients to chaplains and other clergy. In this study, we examined how staff members of an agency have enhanced services through the integration of Christian faith and practice. The profession of social work provides social workers with a unique opportunity to

professionally and ethically integrate faith with practice in all situations. Avoiding spirituality and religion would be professional incompetence. Therefore, it is important for social workers to focus on integrating faith in practice without imposing their religion on clients. ❖

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