The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Spirituality and Social Work

Beth R. Crisp

Spirituality as a protective factor for children and adolescents

Publication details
Linda Benavides
Published online on: 27 Mar 2017


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Introduction

The last 30 years have seen a shift in the social work profession from a dissociation of the religious/spiritual to an embracement of spirituality as an important human condition (Sheridan 2009; Weick et al. 1989). More recently, attention has turned to the spiritual lives of children and adolescents. Spiritual development from childhood to adolescence has been explored by several authors (Boyatzis et al. 2006; Coles 1990; Hart 2006; Hay 1994; Hay and Nye 2006; Hay et al. 2006; Rew et al. 2007; Schwartz et al. 2006; Smith and Denton 2005). Spirituality has been identified as a source of resiliency for at-risk children and adolescents (Crawford et al. 2006); as a source of decline in risk behaviours, such as substance use/abuse and early sexual experimentation (Blakeney and Blakeney 2006; Hodge et al. 2001; Rostosky et al. 2004), and as a factor in positive adolescent development (Benson et al. 2005; King and Benson 2006). The purpose of this chapter is to explore how spirituality can act as a protective factor for children and adolescents and consider the implications of this for social work practice.

Spirituality has been defined by Canda and Furman (2010: 5) as a ‘universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, wellbeing, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others, and ultimate reality, however understood’. Hence, in this chapter, spirituality is understood as a search for meaning and purpose, for interconnectedness and transcendence, which can occur within and outside of religious practices (Canda and Furman 2010), as a source of strength (Benson et al. 2005; King and Benson 2006) and ‘as an aspect of lived experience’ (Crisp 2008: 367).

Spiritual lives of children and adolescents

The spiritual lives of children and adolescents have historically been neglected in the research literature. This is in part the result of the long-held belief that children and younger adolescents do not have the ability for abstract thought needed to contemplate spiritual issues. According to Hart (2006: 164), ‘there is a prevalent presupposition that genuine spirituality requires adult abstract thinking and language ability’, that reduces ‘childhood spirituality into nothing more than a form of immaturity or inadequacy’ (Hay and Nye 2006: 57). As a result, earlier explora-
Spirituality as a protective factor

Research with children over the last three decades has pointed to the innate nature of spirituality. In his book *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles (1990) presents his findings from extensive interviews with over 500 children and adolescents from different countries and of various religions and nonreligious backgrounds. Coles, who met with over 100 of these children at least 25 times over the course of a few years, found that what he had originally thought were expressions of religiosity, upon further reflection were expressions of participants’ spirituality. Coles (1990: 37) concluded that ‘Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? are the eternal questions children ask more intensely, unremittingly, and subtly than we sometimes imagine’.

Similarly, other researchers (Hay and Nye 2006) have explored spirituality from a biological and evolutional viewpoint, which ‘asserts the existence of an embodied spiritual awareness or “relational consciousness” that is antecedent to both religious and ethical beliefs’ (Hay et al. 2006: 51). Spirituality is understood as a trait that has survived in humans for its usefulness to human growth and development. If spirituality was not essential it would not have survived within the species (Hay 1998).

Consequently, there is growing support for the idea that spirituality is an innate process whereby individuals are born spiritual, and this spiritual self is either supported or stifled through the individual’s environment, including family and friends (Boyatzis et al. 2006; Rew et al. 2007; Schwartz et al. 2006). King has claimed:

This potential or capacity for spirituality is present in every human being, but it needs to be activated and realised. Its awakening and development during childhood is of great importance, but it requires that parents and teachers will recognize this hidden potential.

(King 2013: 6)

Similarly, Hay asserts that children and adolescents need guidance from family and friends to ‘become “aware of their awareness” and to reflect on this experience in the light of the culture within which it emerges’ (1998: 13). It is important to note that for many, this spiritual growth occurs within traditional religious contexts. As such, an appreciation of the innateness of spirituality that thrives within different cultures, within or outside of religious contexts, is important.

The conceptual and empirical research into the spiritual life of children and adolescents has opened the door to the exploration of spirituality as a protective factor for this population. The literature on resiliency and protective factors will be reviewed before exploring spirituality as a protective factor for children and adolescents.

Protective factors

Research on resiliency and protective factors began in the 1970s with the work of Werner and Smith (1977). Through their longitudinal study with a group of children born in the 1950s in Hawaii, Werner and Smith brought attention to the fact that despite adverse circumstances (poverty, homelessness, exposure to violence, etc.) many individuals are able to overcome challenges and have positive developmental trajectories. Resilience is understood as ‘a variable quality that derives from a process of repeated interactions between a person and favourable features of the surrounding context in a person’s life’ (Gilligan 2004: 94). These favourable strengths are known in the research literature as protective factors (Howard et al. 1999). Protective factors are defined as those strengths, internal and external, which enable...
individuals to successfully adapt to stressful life events (Alvord and Grados 2005; Howard et al. 1999). Protective factors are ‘hypothesized to interact with sources of risk such that they reduce the probability of negative outcomes under conditions of high risk’ (Compas et al. 1995: 273). As such, protective factors can be seen as the ‘building blocks’ (Minnard 2002: 235) of resilience. Protective factors have been identified as both internal and external strengths of children and adolescents. Internal protective factors identified in the literature include hope, internal locus of control, self-esteem, self-regulation, intelligence and positive interpersonal relationships (Carbonell et al. 2002; Kliewer et al. 2004; Luthar 1991). Three primary systems in a child’s life (family, school and community) have been identified as categories of external protective factors (Howard et al. 1999). Recently, spirituality as an internal protective factor has begun to receive attention in the literature.

**Spirituality as protective factor for children and adolescents**

Spirituality has been identified as a source of strength for children and adolescents exposed to stressful life events, such as homelessness (Bender et al. 2007; Williams 2004), exposure to domestic violence – including intimate partner violence and child abuse (Benavides 2012), and community violence – including wars and armed conflicts (Betancourt and Khan 2008; Bryant-Davis and Wong 2013). In his qualitative study on homeless youth, Kidd (2003: 250) found that for these participants, ‘when they were feeling very down, this sense of spirituality gave some meaning to their suffering, and that there was a “reason” why they had survived up to that point’.

Spirituality has also been found to moderate the development of mental health problems (Cotton et al. 2005; Davis et al. 2003). In their study on the impact of spirituality on depression, Cotton et al. (2005: 529e12) found that adolescents with ‘higher levels of spiritual wellbeing, in particular existential wellbeing, had fewer depressive symptoms and fewer risk-taking behavior’. Spirituality has also been identified as a protective factor for substance use/abuse (Hodge et al. 2001; Knight et al. 2007; Ritt-Olson et al. 2004; Sussman et al. 2006), early sexual behaviours (Rostosky et al. 2004) and as a strong predictor of happiness in children (Holder et al. 2010). Hodge et al. (2001: 159) elaborate, stating ‘because spirituality may enhance self-esteem and perceptions of personal efficacy, youths may develop the internal resources to be able to make choices that are consistent with their own values and beliefs’.

These studies indicate that spirituality is a fundamental form of resilience that enhances positive development and can protect children and adolescents from the development of at-risk behaviours. Spirituality, however, is not experienced and expressed the same by all. In the following section, we will explore diverse ways in which children and adolescents express their spirituality and how those expressions serve as a protective mechanism.

Children and adolescents of distinct cultures and/or faiths express their spirituality in diverse ways. For some, spirituality is tied to traditional religious experiences, while for others expressions of spirituality are non-traditional, such as art and music. For some it is both. Through the act of participating in religious activities and/or creative pursuits, these expressions of spirituality protect the child or adolescent from the development of adverse developmental outcomes.

**Traditional religious expressions**

For children and adolescents who express their spirituality through traditional religious expressions, attending services, participating in youth activities, praying/meditating and/or celebrating religious holidays can provide the means by which they are able to continue to grow and express
Spirituality as a protective factor

For example, in a study of young African members of a Pentecostal church in South Africa, the researchers found that for the participants, involvement in ‘praise and worship activities allowed them to “cope and escape” while the music participation was linked with upliftment, transformation, and feelings of wellbeing’ (Tshabalala and Patel 2010: 80). Similarly, in their study of Muslim adolescents in India, Annalakshmi and Abeer (2011) found that those adolescents with a religious personality were more likely to be resilient.

For many children and adolescents, religious rituals celebrating milestones or transitions serve as protective factors. In the Latino Catholic community, Quinceneras are an important part of a young Catholic female’s life. Quinceneras, which celebrate a female’s fifteenth birthday, mark the transition from a young girl to a young woman accepting responsibility for her faith in God and the responsibilities that this entails. As part of the religious ceremony, Quinceneras renew their baptismal promises and recite a special prayer to the Virgen de Guadalupe asking for guidance in following the footsteps of Jesus and being faithful to her baptismal promises (Cantu 2002). Similarly, in the Jewish tradition, adolescent males and females celebrate coming of age rituals. At the age of 13, males celebrate their Bar Mitzvah in which they are considered as having the same rights and responsibilities as grown men. Jewish females celebrate their Bat Mitzvah at the age of 12, which signifies the transition from a young girl to a woman with the responsibility to carry forth her own faith and traditions (Patai and Bar-Itzhak 2013). For these adolescents, their sense of responsibility towards their faith and the promises made during the Quincenera and Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations, serve to deter risk behaviours and serve as a protective mechanism. This could be, as expressed by Bhagwan (2009: 229), because ‘rituals awaken the mysterious and stir up emotions of wonder, reverence, awe, and openness to new possibilities’.

Rituals are also important protective factors in other cultures. In their study of Muslim adolescents, Annalakshmi and Abeer (2011) found that Islamic rituals served as a source of strength for the participants. The authors elaborated, stating:

the highly resilient were higher on Islamic rituals (religious practice and ritual behaviour indicative of the manifestation of one’s religious worldview) and on Mu’amat (religiously guided behaviours towards one’s family, fellow human beings and the rest of creation including animals and the natural environment).

(Annalakshmi and Abeer 2011: 731)

For Native American and First Nation children and adolescents, participation in tribal ceremonies such as sweat lodges, pow wows and talking circles, serve as traditional healing practices (Portman and Garrett 2006) and leads to a sense of ‘belonging and communal meaningfulness’ (Garrett et al. 2014: 485).

Non-traditional expressions

Children and adolescents express their spirituality in diverse ways, both within and outside of traditional religious practices. For some children and adolescents, creative expressions, such as writing, drawing, playing musical instruments, etc. are a means by which they connect to their spiritual selves.

For many children and adolescents, music – either through the act of playing a musical instrument or through the process of listening to music – helps transcend the individual to a space where they are able to process and make sense of their world. This may be, as expressed
by Gellel (2013: 217–8), a result of spirituality being ‘tied with the search for meaning and for
the self, as well as with the aesthetic and with emotions and concepts that are difficult to express
in words’.

Similarly, writing (e.g. journaling, storytelling, etc.) and art are powerful tools that provide
opportunities for children and adolescents to connect to their spiritual selves. It also provides
‘the means and opportunity by which they can rediscover a positive self-image in order to
struggle against the development of a self-destructive and negative sense of self’ (Kollontai 2010:
269–70).

Spirituality can also be expressed through other means, such as playing sports (Smith and
Denton 2005) and dancing (Broadbent 2004). As expressed by Snowber (2007: 1453), ‘dance is
the garden where we can let our soul take both roots and wings, connecting to ourselves, others,
and most importantly, to that which is mystery’.

Implications and conclusion

Social work practitioners who work with children and adolescents should be encouraged by
the literature supporting spirituality as a protective factor. Practitioners should strive to provide
opportunities for children and adolescents to explore their spirituality from the beginning
of their work together. It is important, however, that social work practitioners do not bias
their work with children and adolescents with their own spiritual beliefs and/or practices. In
particular, the idea that children and younger adolescents are not spiritual should be avoided.
Practitioners must continuously engage in a process of self-assessment to prevent bias from
entering their work with children and adolescents.

As spirituality is experienced and understood in diverse ways, practitioners would do well
to consider conducting spiritual assessments to best meet the spiritual needs of the children and
adolescents they work with. David Hodge’s (2015) book, Spiritual Assessment in Social Work and
Mental Health Practice, might be useful towards this aim. It is also important for practitioners to
realise that for some children and adolescents their spirituality may be experienced through both
traditional and non-traditional expressions.

Social work practitioners can, through their knowledge of the spiritual lives of children and
adolescents, provide a safe space for children and adolescents to express, process and practice
their spirituality. Social work practitioners can incorporate interventions such as music therapy,
sacred play, sand-tray therapy, art therapy, writing and poetry therapy, and dance therapy,
to name a few interventions in their work with children and adolescents (Bhagwan 2009;
Derezotes 2006; Land 2015). These interventions can also be incorporated into group work
with children and adolescents. Through interventions such as these, practitioners can create
a space for spiritual expressions and growth. Derezotes (2006: 155) addresses the importance
of a safe space for interventions, such as sacred play, to be successful, stating, ‘sacred play both
requires and creates more spiritual freedom. When a child is allowed to freely follow his or her
own natural interests, play can be an expression of soul and Creative Spirit’.

As such, it is imperative that social workers advocate for the inclusion of creative expressions
in schools, especially in lower socioeconomic school districts where the arts are typically the first
programmes cut. Social work practitioners can advocate for the development of programmes
within existing social service agencies that foster creative expressions. Social workers can also
provide needed resources, such as art supplies, for their clients to use at home.

For children and adolescents whose spirituality is experienced through religious expressions,
social workers can incorporate into their interventions elements of the faith community their
clients identify with. For example, Bhagwan (2009) suggests the use of spiritual stories found in
different faiths and/or cultures as a way to engage the client in dialogue about their spirituality and how their spirituality can be a source of strength. Similarly, Land (2015) suggests that expressive therapies, such as music therapy and sand-tray therapy, can be modified to include important religious practices and beliefs that clients can relate to. In addition, practitioners can assist their clients with connecting to the faith communities they belong to. Sometimes it is as simple as setting up transportation to church, synagogue, temple, parish, mosque, etc.

In order to be competent, ethical social workers, it is important that practitioners make an effort to meet the spiritual needs of the children and adolescents they work with. Unfortunately, spirituality is not taught consistently in social work programmes nor is it addressed in practice consistently (Oxhandler et al. 2015; Sheridan 2009). It is imperative that as social workers we work to change this.

In conclusion, spirituality is a strength inherent in children and adolescents that can moderate the effects of negative life experiences and contributes to overall positive development. The current chapter provided an understanding of spirituality as a protective factor and addressed the process by which spirituality serves as a protective mechanism. Implications and recommendations for social work practice were addressed.

References

207


Spirituality as a protective factor


