
Editorial Introduction

Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Youth Through Professional Helping: Emerging Issues in International Perspective

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Abstract

The articles in this special issue of *Currents* derive from the Second Biennial World Conference on Positive Youth Development and Welfare through Strengths and Spirituality: Views from Korea and America, held at the University of Kansas in 2008. This editorial introduction provides background to the articles and an overview of their contributions. It explains the international context of the recent movement to address youth spirituality, including guiding values for spiritually sensitive social work, definitions of spirituality and religion, and recent historical trends. Finally, potential hazards for spiritual development of youth are highlighted related to neglect of spirituality by helping professionals, maltreatment by religious and spiritual authorities, constriction of spiritually gifted youth, and oppression of youth members of religious and nonreligious minorities.

Keywords: youth, spirituality, social work, international, gifted, oppression

Introduction

On behalf of Dr. Jeong Woong Cheon and myself, I welcome you to this special issue of *Currents* on Spirituality and Positive Youth Development. This issue presents theoretical and empirical studies that link insights about spirituality as a source of strength and resilience for children and youth. This is the first major social work publication (journal volume or book) in English to bring together insights from scholars of social work and allied helping professions who share an interest in positive youth development and spirituality. Social work literature on spirituality has so far emphasized research and practice with adults. We hope that this special issue helps to catalyze greater attention to children's and youth's spirituality. This is important because empirical and theoretical studies

find that youth who engage spirituality and religious participation are likely to have more positive development and better thriving in adversity (such as inner awareness, sense of meaning, spiritual identity, and sense of connection with a Higher Power) and less risk taking (e.g. Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Cheon & Canda, 2010; Crompton, 1998; Wilson, 2004).

This special issue was made possible by the innovative efforts of Dr. Jeong Woong Cheon, the co-editor. Dr. Cheon organized a conference from which these articles were developed -- Positive Youth Development and Welfare through Strengths and Spirituality: Views from Korea and America. This 2nd Biennial World Conference, World Forum on Youth Studies, was held July 18-23, 2008 at the University of Kansas. Dr. Cheon solicited the papers for the conference and reviewed them for acceptance as presentations. Subsequently, we encouraged presenters to revise and submit manuscripts for possible publication and scholarly peer review in a process managed by myself and the *Currents* staff. Dr. Cheon's leadership and vision to link social work with the interdisciplinary and international positive youth development movement were crucial to the creation of this special issue. In addition, Dr. Rick Enns and Dr. Anne Marie McLaughlin, of *Currents*, graciously supported our initiative by producing this special issue in an online electronic format that would be accessible freely throughout the world. We are grateful for this opportunity to expand knowledge and encourage further collaborations among scholars and practitioners interested in youth spirituality and social work internationally.

Dr. Cheon and I give thanks to the organizations that provided sponsorship and funding for the academic portion of the conference: The World Academy for Youth Studies (WAYS) and The Korean Welfare Education Institute (KWEI) in the Republic of Korea; the following units at the University of Kansas, USA: The School of Social Welfare, The Strengths Institute, and The Center for East Asian Studies; and The Shumaker Family Foundation.

We thank the peer reviewers and authors for their valuable contributions and keen insights. Finally, we very much appreciate the work of Dr. Rick Enns, Senior Editor of *Currents,* and Dr. Anne Marie McLaughlin, Managing Editor, for their dedication to prepare and publish this special issue.

Overview of the Articles

This special issue on spirituality and positive youth development in social work brings together insights from interdisciplinary literature reviews and

theoretical and empirical studies by authors representing social work and psychology from three countries.

The first two articles provide theoretical insights from micro and macro systems perspectives. Dr. Cheon's article offers a concise introduction to a variety of theories of spiritual development and related helping practices that focus on children and youth. Dr. Doe places understanding of youth spirituality in a larger context of socio-cultural environments by formulating a conceptualization of spiritual social capital and highlighting contrasts between Western and East Asian cultures. These authors' familiarity with both American and Korean cultural and practice settings gives them a broad perspective.

The remaining three articles are empirical studies. Dr. Kvarfordt and Dr. Sheridan's cross-sectional survey of USA-based clinical social workers who serve children and/or adolescents reveals their attitudes about addressing religion and spirituality in practice. It also examines variables that were predictive of practitioners using spiritually-based interventions. This collaboration between Canadian and USA based researchers helps to provide a distinctly North American vantage point on practitioners' attitudes and implications for practice and professional ethics.

The final two articles provide a complementary vantage point by examining the views of children and youth themselves. Drs. Williams and Lindsey's interviews with formerly runaway and homeless youth reveal how they face adversity through spiritual beliefs and practices. Dr. Goldstein applies her expertise as a transpersonal psychologist to explore adolescents' spiritual development and sense of identity through a mixed methods study.

Taken all together, these articles provide a foundation of knowledge and possibilities for innovations in social work practice and research regarding spirituality and youth. My remaining remarks will offer suggestions and raise some issues to encourage further interdisciplinary and international collaboration in this newly emerging field of spirituality in positive youth development. Since these articles derive from a conference that focused on collaboration between North American and Korean scholars and practitioners, I will highlight some examples from East Asia.

Spiritually Sensitive Social Work: Guiding Values and Concepts

Guiding Values for Spiritually Sensitive Social Work with Youth

Spiritually sensitive social work approaches spirituality in a way that respects the full range of spiritual expressions of our clients and their

communities, including religious and nonreligious spiritual perspectives (Canda & Furman, 2010). This means honoring diversity both in terms of the importance of differences and the significance of our common humanity. Just as with adults, social work with youth needs to respect their varying beliefs, styles, goals, and levels of interest regarding spirituality as these intersect with diversity of culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other attributes and contexts. So it is helpful that Doe's article suggests ways that spiritual capital may vary according to broad cultural differences (i.e. individualistic cultures of the West versus familistic and communalistic cultures of East Asia). Goldstein examines the extent to which theoretically assumed gender differences of development may affect adolescent identity formation. Williams and Lindsey sheds light on the spiritual perspectives of formerly homeless and runaway youth.

A special consideration implied in some of the articles is age cohort bias of helping professionals. Since most human services are provided by adults, professional helpers must be especially cautious not to impose (even unintentionally) adultcentric views of religion and spirituality on children and youth. The fact that most social work research and practice guidelines have focused on adults, as many of this issue's authors point out, may reflect an adultcentric bias. For example, Cheon's review of theory illustrates that some developmental theorists minimize the distinctive qualities and abilities of children and youth regarding spirituality. Further, due to rapid globalization in the information era, youth in many countries are growing up in technological and cultural contexts quite different from the childhood experiences of their parents, service providers, and other authorities.

Kvarfordt and Sheridan wisely point out that we need to refine ethical guidelines for addressing spirituality, that were developed mainly with adults in mind, to the situations and contexts of youth. In particular, this means that practitioners should address spirituality only when young clients (and in many cases their guardians or parents) express interest, relevance, willingness, and comfort and only when practitioners have the appropriate level of spiritual sensitivity and preparation.

For example, my MSW students doing field education practica in American public school settings report that school administrators often restrict school social workers from addressing the topic of spirituality with the children, due to issues concerning constitutional separation of church and state, gaining informed consent from youth and their guardians, and dealing with controversies in the school and community around differences of religious and nonreligious beliefs. This does not mean that spirituality should be off limits, but it does mean that social

workers should learn skills for spiritually sensitive practice that take into account these diversity and ethical issues distinct to public school settings.

Spiritually sensitive social workers who wish to serve youth on the world stage must be able to shift focus and action to link across local, national, and international social systems as well as to support mutually beneficial life-ways among humans and all other beings and ecosystems on this planet and beyond (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003; Canda, 2002a, 2005; Canda & Furman, 2010). Thus, spiritual sensitivity embraces and transcends what are commonly called cultural sensitivity and cultural competence.

Defining Spirituality and Religion

All of the authors in this issue review various definitions of spirituality and religion and clarify their own. It is obvious that there are no universally accepted definitions. However, in the social work, medical, psychological, and positive youth development literatures, there is a common tendency to distinguish the concepts of spirituality and religion as related but different (see Canda & Furman, 2010 for a review and detailed definitions).

It is important to emphasize that professional definitions, are primarily for the purpose of professional discourse. They provide a common provisional set of terms and meanings so that we can interact with each other and our clients around the topic of spirituality. But the terms and definitions always have to be flexible and adaptable to contexts, situations, and communities of youth. In fact, professional helpers do not need to use the words 'spirituality or religion' to get at the meanings behind them in discussion with clients.

It is most common to define spirituality as an aspect of the person involving the human search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and morality, and connectedness with oneself, other people, the universe, and the ground of being however that is understood (such as in theistic, nontheistic, atheistic, animistic, combinations of these, and any other ways you can imagine). Often (but not necessarily) spirituality generates a sense of connection with sacred or transcendent levels of self and reality, such as soul, spirit, vital energies (such as *kundalini* or *qi*), God, or Buddha nature. Spirituality involves centrally important life-orienting beliefs, values, and practices that may be expressed in religious and/or non religious ways.

In my usage, spirituality is a more inclusive and larger concept than religion. The concepts of spirituality and religion are not in a dichotomous relationship. Spirituality may be considered private or it

may be shared with others. Spirituality can be shared and, in fact, in some ways it must be shared, because it infuses our relationships and our connectedness with other beings. This connectedness quality of spirituality may be even more evident in highly familistic and communalistic religions, ideologies, and cultures such as are common in East Asian countries, as Doe points out.

Religion is an institutionalized (that is, socially systematized) pattern of centrally important values, beliefs, and practices that relate to spirituality. These spiritual patterns are shared by a community joined by a tradition transmitted over time. A religion does not have to be organized in a bureaucratic manner, such as in Catholicism. Religions can be small scale, relatively informal, and very flexible as is common with many traditional Indigenous religions that are fully infused into daily life-ways.

National surveys of social workers in the USA, UK, Norway, and New Zealand have shown that the general distinction between the two concepts (i.e. spirituality: more related to meaning and purpose; religion: more related to beliefs, rituals, and organizations) is widely shared by social workers across these countries (Canda & Furman, 2010). As some of the authors in this issue point out, this distinction is also important to many youth who, in popular culture, also distinguish the two concepts. For example, many more youth than elders identify themselves as spiritual but not religious.

These distinctions also appear relevant to Japan, where social workers, educators, and mental health professionals are beginning to adopt the English word ‘spirituality’ (rendered in katakana script) to make this distinction. This is important because most Japanese people do not have formal membership in a religion, though many utilize and connect ideas and practices from Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto for various purposes (Gomi, 2007). For another example, Chinese colleagues have often pointed out to me that it is important to have an understanding of spirituality that does not rely on religion or on belief in Western notions of the supernatural, given the low level of formal religious adherence and relatively low influence of monotheistic religions in mainland China.

In the Republic of Korea, some social workers are making the distinction by adopting the English word ‘spirituality;’ by translating it as *yeong seong* (i.e. sacred or spirit quality) often contrasted with *jonggyo* (i.e. central learning, often used to mean religion); or by creating a new word, *eulal* (literally, spiritual essence; see Canda & Furman 1999/2003). The word *eulal* was composed from Korean roots that encompass spiritual diversity while avoiding connotations associated with a specific religion. This is important due to the spiritual diversity in Korea.

According to a 2005 Korean governmentally sponsored national survey, about 53% of the population identified affiliation with a religion. Among these, about 55% are Christian (34.5% Protestant; 20.6% Catholic) and 43% are Buddhist. Others are Confucian, or practice indigenous religions like shamanism; many blend various religions (see www.korea.net, "Religion", retrieved 7/1/08).

Regarding youth work, this distinction has further utility. In Kvarfordt and Sheridan's study of social workers serving children and/or adolescents in the USA, responders demonstrated a variety of spiritual backgrounds, most Christian (57%) or Jewish (17%), with only 5.4% agnostic or atheist. In another article (2007) they reported that one third of respondents reported multiple religious or spiritual affiliations. In addition, social workers varied widely in level of personal involvement with an organized religious/spiritual group and in practice settings, with 82% working in secular agencies. This observation reinforces the importance of using definitions that are flexible and inclusive enough for spiritually diverse youth-serving social workers, their organizational settings, and the youth clients.

Within literature on youth development and social work with youth, this conceptual distinction and emphasis on client centered understanding is also becoming common (e.g. Cheon & Canda, 2010; Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008). Contemporary young people in the West seem to have little difficulty with this distinction (Smithline, 2000; Wilson, 2002). Given the tremendous spiritual diversity around the world, as well as the great impacts on youth in industrial and postindustrial societies of international travel, the world media, global music and entertainment trends, text messaging, and the internet, professionals should be open to the tremendous rate of change in patterns of religious, spiritual, and cultural life that youth are experiencing.

Historical Context

This special issue reflects a recent growth of interest among social workers regarding the spirituality of youth. This can be understood as one facet of a larger historical trend. (For example, see two other special issues on spirituality in *Currents* at http://currents.synergiesprairies.ca).

Since the 1990s, there has been a rapid increase of social work research and teaching on spiritual diversity in North America and to a lesser extent in Europe and East Asia (Canda, 2002a & 2005; Canda & Furman, 2010; Graham, 2006). This trend was influenced by the rise of humanistic, transpersonal, and ecophilosophical perspectives in social work, alerts by clients that spirituality is important in their lives,

increasing religious diversity in many countries due to immigration and refugee movement, social policy changes (such as Charitable Choice and faith based social service initiatives of the Clinton and Bush administrations in the USA), and empirical studies that show religion and spirituality to be related to strengths and resilience. In the USA, both the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education in various ways formally recognized the importance of religion and spirituality. The Society for Spirituality and Social Work was formed at the University of Kansas in 1990 and the first international conference dedicated to the topic was held there in 2000.

In this new century, all of those trends have been escalating, including interdisciplinary research, because of similar movements in nursing, psychiatry, psychology, medicine, and other fields. There is also the development of global and not just nation-centered perspectives on spirituality and social work. For example, the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work, which began to be formed in the early 2000s, is now a very active and creative organization. The USA and Canadian based organizations collaborate in annual North American conferences. Many other international initiatives on spirituality and social work can be identified through the online Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resource Center via www.socwel.ku.edu/canda.

One can see this trend growing in the Republic of Korea as well. In the early to mid 1990s, there were very few scholarly publications or university courses dedicated to the topic of spirituality, even at religiously affiliated universities (Canda & Canda, 1996; Canda, Shin, & Canda, 1993). A few scholars were advocating for more attention to Buddhist and Christian (i.e. Catholic and Protestant) insights applied to social work. Many social work agencies were sponsored by Christian and Buddhist denominations, but there was a disconnection between this and research or education. There was also a lack of recognition of the importance of the 2000 year plus influences of Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism on social welfare. Further, contemporary Confucian and shamanistic social ethos and community based helping systems were nearly entirely ignored.

However, during the current decade, interest among Korean social work scholars is growing (Kim & Canda, 2009). About 78 scholarly social work articles about spirituality appeared between 2001-2007 in contrast to only about 10 between 1991-2000 and 12 during all the years up to then. There are about 30 books on related topics, most of which were published since 2000. However, most of these deal with religion-specific (mainly Christian and Buddhist) approaches without attending to issues of inclusivity and diversity. There are a few steps toward an

inclusive approach (e.g. Canda, 1999/2003; Yoo, 2003; Yoon, 2004). In the past 8 years, I have made field visits to more than 25 social work agencies throughout Korea that are sponsored by Christian, Buddhist, and Won Buddhist denominations. I observed that many of these provide services to families and youth. This has convinced me of the creativity and dedication among many social workers in the field to draw on religious motivations, ideas, and helping activities.

Unfortunately, Korean social workers have received little theoretical, ethical, empirical, or practical guidance about spiritual diversity from the academy. This situation suggests great potential and need for increased development of spiritually sensitive social work in Korea.

Hazards for the Spiritual Development of Youth

Given our profession's commitment to counter negative discrimination and oppression and to promote empowerment, I would like to emphasize some hazards that youth might face on the path of spiritual development that are not addressed much in the other articles.

First of all, the neglect of spirituality by youth-serving helping professionals, as mentioned above, poses hazards. On the one hand, inadequate competency of social workers regarding spirituality places youthful clients at risk when they raise such issues. On the other hand, social workers who do not engage in sufficient self-examination and growth spiritually are more likely to ignore or denigrate the spirituality of youthful clients or to impose their own spiritual beliefs and values. Since children and youth are by age and life experience often more vulnerable than adult clients, social workers should be especially cautious.

As the articles in this issue illustrate, children and youth have potential for significant spiritual growth that lays the foundation for adulthood. Unfortunately, this developmental potential can be stultified by over-controlling parents and social authorities. On the opposite extreme, if parents, teachers, and other social authorities present chaotic approaches to spirituality or neglect it severely, then youth may be at risk for spiritual confusion. In cases of abuse and neglect, sometimes parents and significant adults, including religious authorities, use their positions of power to physically damage, emotionally intimidate, or sexually exploit youth. Sometimes, when this occurs in a religious context --such as a parent claiming to act as agent of a punishing God or a clergy person who betrays a sense of sacred trust-- this can cause deep emotional scars that take a lifetime to heal. As Maslow (1964) pointed out, religions can serve as contexts for the unfolding of spiritual potential; but they can also suppress or actively oppress the spiritual experiences and insights of

youth, especially if youth do not conform to conventional thinking within their community or religious group.

This might be a particular danger for youth who are specially and intensely interested in spiritual matters from a young age. Erikson (1962 and 1969) referred to such a person as 'homo religiosus' (Latin) which means 'the religious person.'" He wrote detailed psychobiographies of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi to illustrate this type of person. In contemporary parlance, we might refer to such youth as spiritually gifted. Literally, they are geniuses, as that word means someone who is inspired as if by a spirit. These youth are more likely to question religious authorities, to ask deep and challenging questions of adults about the meaning and reasons for life and death, and to have transpersonal experiences that break out of socially conventional reality. As Wilber (2006) has pointed out, profound spiritual experiences in youth do not guarantee that one will be able to sustain and integrate the insights into adult life at a transpersonal level of functioning and consciousness. Thus, social workers should be alert for signs of spiritual giftedness among their young clients; to encourage supportive family, school, peer, and community relationships; and to guard against social forces that might try to quash their spiritual leanings.

Youth members of minority religious groups and youth who are nonreligious within highly religious cultures may also be at risk. This is why the United Nations supports the rights of children, both to freedom of and freedom from religion, although the legal details of these principles are not worked out clearly in international law (Langlaude, 2007). For example, in North America, for several generations, many children of Indigenous communities were coerced or manipulated into adoption, foster care, and boarding school attendance, commonly under the control of Euro-American Christians. In the USA and many other colonialized countries, family disruption and religious persecution have been facets of national policy to destroy, disrupt, contain, or assimilate Indigenous peoples (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008). In the USA, forced removal of Indigenous children was not curtailed until the Indian Child Welfare Act passed by Congress in 1978. Indigenous spiritual ways were and are a target of oppression. As another example, in many parts of the world, Muslim children of immigrant and refugee families may be under extra pressure in the post-9/11 political environment (Ashencaen Crabtree, Husain, & Spalek, 2008).

Conclusion: Nurturing the Spirituality of Youth

The Confucian sage Mencius gave good advice for nurturing the spiritual development of youth (Lao, 1970). He said that the best way to nourish vital life force (*qi*) is to cultivate and express benevolence for the mutual benefit of ourselves and others. He used an analogy of the rice field to describe the correct way to nurture people. Youth are like young rice sprigs in the paddy. An impatient farmer might pull on new rice shoots as though speeding their growth, thus uprooting them in the process. On the opposite extreme, a negligent farmer might ignore the rice, leaving it to be eaten by birds or killed by lack or overabundance of water.

Mencius' analogy implies that children and youth already have an innate potential for spiritual development (Canda, 2002b & 2002c). This potential actualizes according to the quality of nurturing conditions in the environment and the nurturing behaviors and relationships with elders. The analogy does not capture another feature important to Mencius' view of spiritual development, that is, each person's choices and determination to cultivate one's own true nature are also critical to successful spiritual development.

Helping professionals can best cultivate the spirituality of youth by a middle way that nurtures the natural inherent spiritual potential of youth and encourages their ability to make beneficial life choices, without forcing youth into preconceived speeds, styles, or outcomes of development. We also should promote environmental conditions and social policies that maximize opportunities for positive development of youths' spirituality. On the other hand, youth serving professionals who ignore spirituality are like the farmer who leaves the crop to fend for itself or rot in the field. Social workers and other youth serving professionals can join together in order to help each other learn how to nurture the spiritual life of youth in ways that fit the particular situations of each client and community and that support our common humanity and the planet that we all share.

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