

SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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ANNOTATION

This article briefly traces the historical roots and influence of spirituality in a social work context. It illuminates the natural synchrony of spirituality with social development by interconnecting the similarities in their principles, values, approaches and strategies. This paper argues for spirituality to be infused into social work education and illumines several themes that can be used in relation to social development education.

Key words: development, social, science, beyond, similar

Spirituality is an aspect of religious traditions, and also of existential value systems. Elkins (1988) gives this definition: “Spirituality, which comes from the Latin, spiritus, meaning breath of life,” is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through an awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers the Ultimate” (Elkins, 1988). A spiritual belief holds that there is a transcendent, spiritual dimension to life and that the universe is unfolding in a meaningful, purposeful way. Spirituality is the belief that people can connect with something that is beyond mind and matter. Decker (1993) defines spirituality as the “search for purpose and meaning involving both transcendence (the experience of existence beyond the physical/psychological) and immanence (the discovery of the transcendent in the physical/psychological), regardless of religious affiliation.” “To be spiritual is to stand in a relationship to another based on matters of the soul. Spirituality is the way we make meaning out of our lives. It is the recognition of the presence of Spirit within us and a cultivation of a style of life consistent with that presence. Spirituality provides a perspective to foster purpose, meaning and direction to live. It may find expression through religion” (Carson, 1989). Spiritual emergence occurs in the context of our growth through the life cycle, from birth to death, and possibly beyond. This section will draw on three life cycle theories that shed light on the relation of spiritual emergence and the life cycle—Erik Erikson’s (1962, 1963, 1968, 1969, 1982) psychosocial development theory, James Fowler’s (1981, 1984, 1996) cognitive-structural faith development theory, and Ken Wilber’s (1995, 1996) transpersonal spectrum model of development. Most social workers are familiar with Erik Erikson’s theory of development but probably not as it relates to spiritual development. This theory is based on the epigenetic perspective, which views development as a process of psychosocial responses to age-related changes. An example would be an adolescent is expected to be dealing with spiritual challenges pertaining to reevaluation of family based religious beliefs and practices. Also, as a society that marks significant life cycle transition points, such as birth, marriage, childbirth, retirement, and death, it is expected that people will have a heightened sense of preoccupation with existential issues of meaning and purpose, as well as practical behavioral responses, determined by spiritual and religious reference groups, such as rituals. When a person experiences a lack of guidance from spiritual support systems at important life cycle transition points, the person will have greater difficulty meeting the challenge. However, when a person has a large reservoir of internal strengths (Erikson calls them virtues) and skills using spiritual support systems, then we can expect greater resilience in confronting crisis, including spirituality. Erikson suggests that people in later adulthood (after age fifty) review their lives with greater interest and concern as the facts of mortality and physical decline becomes more evident. He believed that people have a heightened sense of spiritual concern at this stage, because there is greater urgency to establish a sense of one’s life that has been worthwhile and meaningful. Questions about death and the possibility of an after-life existence increase.

Wilbur's full spectrum of consciousness has three major components: Basic Structures – are deep and inherent levels of consciousness, that, once they emerge during development, tend to remain in existence throughout the life of the individual. Transitional Structures – are temporary or stage specific perspectives or world views. Here he uses the metaphor of a ladder. The basic structures are the rungs, as people move from one rung to another they have a different world view. Self system – refers to the person as they climb the ladder of spiritual development. The self-system mediates the basic and transitional structures. This model is not linear and holds regressions. At each point, the self goes through a fulcrum, or switch point in its development. Wilbur lists types of pathology at each level, he also states that we must take into account “the standard cautions and qualifications... (of) no pure cases, the influence of cultural influences, genetic predispositions, genetic and traumatic arrests, and blended cases” (Wilbur, 1996). Wilbur is most interested in the trans-egoic levels of development, which some people achieve in a stable manner during adulthood. He does not separate adulthood into age-linked stages of ego development. Wilbur refers to his model as holarchy, an ordering of increasingly comprehensive wholes. One might portray each stage in a circle that encompasses the earlier stage in smaller ones. In other words, at each stage, the person's consciousness is able to incorporate more aspects of reality. When spiritual emergence is very rapid and dramatic, it can become a crisis, or spiritual emergency. People who are in such a crisis can be bombarded with inner experiences that abruptly challenge their old beliefs and ways of existing. Their relationship with reality shifts very rapidly. Suddenly they feel uncomfortable and it is difficult to meet the demands of everyday life. They can be out of touch with the external reality. Physically they may experience forceful energies and tremors.

LITERATURE

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