

Holistic Social Work Assessment

Religious, Spiritual, And Cultural Dimensions

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The purpose of this paper is to offer a holistic approach to integrating cultural relevance, spirituality, and religious dimensions into social work assessment. Traditional assessment approaches may be ineffective with clients who are culturally, religiously, and spiritually inclined. Holistic assessment in social work is crucial because it provides a comprehensive understanding of a client's needs, strengths, and challenges by considering all aspects of their life. This includes not only their physical and mental health but also their cultural background and spiritual beliefs. This paper presented social workers with alternative assessment approaches and instruments that may be employed when working with culturally, religiously, and spiritually inclined clients. The author contends that holistic assessment enables social workers to identify and operationalize dimensions of clients' experiences that may be critical to effective service provision but would otherwise be overlooked. The paper also explored some of the spiritual and cultural assessment tools such as the historian and ecomaps assessment tools. In summary, holistic assessment in social work, which includes cultural and spiritual dimensions, is essential for providing effective, respectful, and client-centered care. It ensures that social workers can address the diverse and complex needs of clients in a manner that is both sensitive and effective. A systematic review of the literature was conducted to establish the dimensions of holistic assessment in social work.

Keywords: Holistic Social Work, Work Assessment, Religious, Spiritual, And Cultural Dimensions,

1. Introduction

The assessment of social work clients necessitates a holistic approach that encompasses various dimensions of their lives, including spirituality, religion, and culture. These elements play crucial roles in shaping individuals' identities, values, and coping mechanisms. This paper explores the intersection of spirituality, religion, and culture in social work assessments, highlighting key findings and implications for practice. Religion, culture, and spirituality play significant roles in social work assessment, influencing how practitioners

understand and engage with clients (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001). As part of intervention within the welfare space, it is important to consider religion, culture, and spirituality in the helping process to work ethically in the profession, and more so to fully acknowledge that the client's worldview is significant in the success of the helping-process relationship. Moreover, Moore (2003) and Baskin (2003) caution that it is important to work and assess clients from how they view their surroundings, context, and environment because each client's unique context and beliefs shape their experiences, and social workers must approach assessment and intervention with sensitivity and respect. Baskin (2002) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005) suggest the need to incorporate the spiritual dimension within social work practice and highlight values such as client self-determination, service, social justice, dignity, and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence, suggesting a more holistic view of a person in their environment. Moreover, the approach of holistic assessment is premised on the principle of non-discrimination and a non-judgmental attitude in which social workers are required to regard their clients' well-being as their professional obligation and as such serve them without discrimination on religious, cultural, and spiritual grounds.

Since spirituality is frequently deep-seated in culture, social workers must be aware of both the diversity of humankind and the diversity of spiritual practices (Canda, 1998). Essentially, they must develop both cultural and spiritual sensitivity. In fact, Béres (2004) makes the case that in order to provide a socially just and ethical practice, social workers need to consider how their spirituality influences their work. Consequently, incorporating spirituality into social work is just as crucial as incorporating other facets of diversity, like multiculturalism, cultural competence, and holistic methods. Therefore, spiritual education would come from and be in line with the ethical standards of the profession (Hodge, 2005). However, concerns and criticism regarding pedagogy have been raised, particularly about social workers who have diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations, as a result of the interaction between spirituality, religion, and anti-oppressive practice (Todd & Coholic, 2007).

The aim of the study

The paper aimed to explore the spiritual, religious, and cultural dimensions of assessment in social work. The research question guiding the inception of this paper is "What are the holistic assessment tools that social workers may use to assess clients who are spiritually, religiously, and culturally inclined". To accomplish the aim of this study, the following objectives were developed.

- To explore the assessment tools that may be utilized to assist spiritually,

religiously, and culturally inclined clients.

- To describe how and tools that may be used to assist spiritually, religiously, and culturally inclined clients.
- To provide different assessment tools that will assist social workers to better intervene when assisting clients.

2. Research Methodology

The systematic literature review (SLR) is a rigorous method employed by scholars to synthesize existing research on a specific topic systematically. This method involves a structured process of identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all available research relevant to a particular research question or area. Below is an example of how the SLR method was applied in an academic article, illustrating its systematic and comprehensive approach (Lame, 2019).

The authors began by formulating clear research questions as stated earlier in this paper in line with the focus of the study. To ensure the relevance and quality of the included studies, the authors established specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles and studies emphasizing spiritual, religious, and cultural assessment in social work and social welfare from 2003 to 2023. The articles needed to be qualitative in nature and peer reviewed. Non-peer-reviewed articles and non-quantitative studies were excluded from this study. The researchers conducted a thorough literature search across multiple databases, including PubMed, ERIC, and Google Scholar. They used keywords such as “holistic assessment”, “spiritual assessment”, “religious assessment”, “cultural assessment”, and “social work assessment”. The initial search yielded 866 articles. The authors then screened the titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria, resulting in 171 articles. After a full-text review, 43 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the review. For each of the 43 studies, data were extracted regarding the study design, sample size, types of digital learning tools used, and measured outcomes. The authors employed qualitative synthesis methods. To ensure the reliability of the included studies, the authors assessed the quality of each study using the Cochrane Collaboration’s tool for assessing risk of bias. This involved evaluating aspects such as randomisation, blinding, and attrition rates.

The importance of recognising the importance of spirituality, religion, and culture in social work

Spirituality is an aspect of religious traditions and existential value systems. Canda and Furman (2010) define spirituality, which comes from the Latin spiritus, meaning breath of life, as “a way of being and experiencing that comes about through an awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values about self, others, nature, life, and

whatever one considers the Ultimate” (Banerjee & Canda, 2012; Canda, Furman & Canda, 2020). A spiritual belief maintains that the universe is developing in a meaningful, intentional way and that life has a transcendent, spiritual component. The idea that humans can communicate with something that exists outside of matter and mind is known as spirituality. The above assertions by the authors unearthed a critical element that challenges social work assessment especially the need to tap into the spiritual relationships of clients as one of the dimensions for understanding their problems.

According to Decker (1993), Fellin (2000), and Talbot (2000), spirituality is the pursuit of meaning and purpose that involves both immanence (the finding of the transcendent in the physical/psychological realm) and transcendence (the experience of existence beyond the physical/psychological realm), regardless of religious affiliation. The authors further enumerated that being spiritual means having a relationship with another person that is founded on soul-related issues. Our spirituality is how we interpret our existence. It involves acknowledging the existence of Spirit within us and developing a way of living that is in line with that presence. Spirituality offers a viewpoint that promotes meaning, purpose, and direction in life. It may manifest itself in a religious context (Carson, 1989; Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2000). The authors fully concur with the latter expression of spirituality which recognises spirituality as the experience of clients beyond the physical and psychological being. This has been one of the gaps within many helping professions with the focus being more on physical and psychological well-being, without opening a space for other dimensions such as spirituality, religion, and culture. It is worth noting that most scholars have directed this shortfall towards the social work curriculum and its reluctance to explore other dimensions.

According to Hodge (2001), and Ferraro and Kelley-Moore (2000), spirituality and religion are often used interchangeably. However, according to Edward (1999), and Banerjee and Canda (2012), there have been several attempts in recent literature on social work to define these terms and distinguish between them. Summarily, the authors suggest that the definition of spirituality should include the spiritual beliefs and practices that are patterned into social institutions, with community support and traditions maintained over time, Spirituality has also been defined as the beliefs and practices that develop based on personal values and ideology of the meaning and purpose of life. It refers to the belief that there is a power or powers outside of an individual’s own that transcend understanding. In line with the three dimensions of spirituality mentioned, the authors further categorized the following aspects of spirituality:

- Making personal meaning out of situations
- Coming to an understanding of self
- Appreciating the importance of connections to others

These three categories or dimensions synchronize well with intervention theories in the social work profession, especially the ecosystems theory that helps social workers understand the relationship between themselves and the environment/context they find themselves in. In addition, it emphasizes the need for spiritual cognizance by highlighting the relationship between spirituality and religion. Hodge (2001) articulates religious faith as how a person practices their particular religion. Religious faith is more than just what is preached; it also refers to how a person approaches themselves, their neighbours, and the universe. It is a total response shaped by a religious tradition's understanding of a transcendent dimension (Canda, Furman & Canda, 2020).

Religion is a personal awareness or conviction of the existence of a supreme being or supernatural powers or influence, controlling the destiny of the individual, humanity, and nature Canda (2021). Religion is a system of beliefs, values, rules for conduct, and rituals. It is a way for a person to express their spirituality. Ideally, religion provides an atmosphere for spiritual development (Canda & Leibowitz, 2019; Hodge, 2000). Religion is concerned with practices and rules of conduct that are often associated with religious institutions. Pargament and Mahoney argue that, for many, spirituality involves searching to discover what is sacred, and this journey can take either traditional pathways (such as organized religions) or non-traditional avenues (such as involvement in twelve-step groups, meditation, or retreat center experiences.) Thus, spirituality is a broader concept than religion, and spiritual expression may or may not involve a particular religious faith or religious institution (Cheon & Canda, 2010; Nelson-Becker & Canda, 2008; Nelson-Becker, Canda & Nakashima, 2006; Robbins, Chatterjee, Canda & Leibowitz, 2019). Moreover, Thabede (2008) argues that there appears to be a deliberate attempt to sideline other related religious or spiritual-based activities as being primitive and backward. To find an expression within the broad scope of religiosity, activities such as libation ceremonies, malopo in Sepedi, and *go phasa* (appeasing of ancestors) are criticized as demonic and less assistive in terms of the helping profession.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2015), culture is evidenced in human behaviour and relates to thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. In social work assessment, cultural competence is important as it highlights the importance of the capacity to work effectively with families from any ethnic, religious, or cultural background. Moreover, culturally competent practice acknowledges and incorporates the importance of every family's culture; the need for each worker to develop their cultural knowledge; and the development of services to meet culturally specific needs (Colby & Ortman, 2015). In summary, cultural competence is a set of behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in policy and practice in

children's social care, practice in the team and practice with other agencies and services. The implication is that social workers should consider all the relevant cultural aspects during assessment, especially with culturally inclined clients.

According to Barker (2013), culturally competent practitioners should understand the worldview and culture of a family. The practitioners should have specific knowledge of cultural diversity and relevant historical influences. They should also recognize that different families from the same cultural or religious group may have different beliefs and values. It is always important to ask children and family members what matters to them and not to make assumptions. Social workers should have specific skills and knowledge of intervention techniques to provide an effective assessment and intervention service that recognizes cultural factors in all families (Link & Ramanathan, 2011). This requires knowledge and understanding of families' cultural norms and how they influence attitudes and behavior (Gilbert, Goode & Dunne, 2007). Someone may see a psychologist or psychiatrist for counseling and medication while also practicing meditation, yoga, or other mindfulness techniques rooted in traditional healing systems. According to Sue (2006) and Hodge (2000), cultural assessment and interventions also call for social workers to be aware of the significant cultural activities within the population they serve. Moreover, social workers need to be flexible enough to allow clients to self-determine their perspective of the etiology of the impediment and how they want it to be resolved. Within the cultural and traditional space, clients undertake different activities as part of their healing process. For example, a client who believes that their problems are a result of angry ancestors who are punishing them for disobedience may feel the need to perform a ritual to appease the ancestors as part of the resolution of their healing and should be given the space to do so. The helping profession should consider the following cultural and traditional activities during assessment:

- **Healing circles:** Used for conflict resolution and emotional healing, healing circles are a traditional practice where community members come together to support one another. In many communities in South Africa, people who have life challenges seek the wisdom of traditional leadership such as the induna and his advisers for guidance and wisdom. The indunas play a significant role as facilitators through their conflict resolution mechanisms to promote peace and stability within the society.
- **Land-based healing:** These are programmes that incorporate nature and the land, reflecting the deep connection many Indigenous cultures have with their environment which also includes healthy traditional medicine and consultation with traditional healers as part of the healing process.
- **Elder guidance:** Involving elders in the social work process can provide wisdom and guidance based on traditional knowledge, for example, referral to the rakgadi (aunt) – who in Sepedi holds a significant senior

position within a clan and advises the clan members during conflicts and disagreements.

- Cultural ceremonies: Clients may consider cultural ceremonies and rituals important as part of the healing and support process, including *Malopo, go thwasa, go phasa* (libation ceremonies), *gofa ngwana lebitso*.

The relationship between religion and spirituality

The challenge of precisely conceptualizing and operationalizing a definition of religion and spirituality has been discussed in the literature. According to the findings, most respondents see spirituality as a personal construct and entity, whereas religion is defined as an individual's personal beliefs and practices that are supported by the community (Hodge, 2015). As a result, numerous definitions of spirituality may be appropriate for different groups of people (Senreich, 2013).

The term "spirituality" describes how a person integrates their subjective relationship with the unknown aspects of life into their perspective of the universe, the world, other people, themselves, moral principles, and their sense of purpose in life (Senreich, 2013). To evaluate religion and spirituality in the field of social work education, Oxhandler, Moffatt, and Giardina (2019) consider the second definition of spirituality where the individual's search for meaning and answers to life's big questions, including those regarding the sacred and transcendent, may or may not result in the creation of religious rituals and the forming of communities.

Religion is defined according to an individual's personal beliefs, values, and practices, or according to an institutional system (Crisp, 2015; Street & Moyle, 2019). According to Oxhandler et al. (2019) and Szaflarski (2013), religion is defined as a system of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, communicate with, or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God (in Western cultures), or Ultimate Truth, Reality, or Nirvana (in Eastern cultures). This definition is specific, inclusive, and based on teachings or moral codes, (Koenig, 2008).

Notwithstanding the challenges, research indicates that individuals who identify as religious may not also identify as spiritual, and vice versa. Others may identify as neither spiritual nor religious, or as neither (Crisp, 2015; Hodge, 2015). The two are distinct ideas that overlap and have connections. Social workers must collaborate across these two ideas. One phrase may be used in conjunction with another or as its expression. To make conclusions about these terms and their effects on the clients they assist, social workers must define them. Depending on where they live and work, clients may have different definitions of spirituality and religion (Floersch & Barker, 2010).

According to Hodge (2001), and Cheon and Canda (2010), religion must

be viewed as a lived social experience that reflects ties to the community and a sense of moral belonging rather than as a collection of abstract, disembodied ideas, and beliefs. Religion serves a purpose and has historically mirrored the socially constructed and accepted belief and behaviour systems found in various communities. For example, Thabede (2008) contends that religion and belief systems are crucial in times of crisis or transition in life. A child's birth can be commemorated by giving gifts and helping. Funerals are held after death to honour the deceased and support the grieving family. These rituals have become commonplace and serve to sustain a community that supports one another by demonstrating group solidarity and upholding social function.

While religion serves a spiritual purpose, it should be distinguished from spirituality because the latter does not include a sacred or supernaturally transcendent component. Indeed, understanding and experiencing an individual's existential self in the world – “what makes an individual tick” – can be used almost interchangeably with spirituality (Hodge, 2001; Cheon & Canda, 2010). Also, spirituality may encompass a very broad range of ground that is extremely permeable, undefined, and amorphous. As a result, spirituality can encompass everything from the breadth and depth of religious transcendence to an astounding variety of ideas and activities, including those that are typically connected to secular, individual hedonism like yoga or massage (Oxhandler et al., 2019).

Although spirituality acknowledges that a more inclusive approach is possible, one that includes people who identify as agnostic, atheist, or without religion, it also appears to represent a “comfortable” way of recognizing the deeper needs of all people who use religion's functions without its encumbrances. This seems to indicate a religiosity for the non-religious and would work equally well by focusing on the existential self. Both the terms “religion” and “spirituality” are used interchangeably in this chapter due to their widespread usage in the literature (Hodge, 2015; Crisp, 2015; Gilbert, Goode & Dunne, 2007).

Views of clients on religion, culture, and spirituality in the helping process

Accordingly, Hodge (2015) examines the general population's perspective on religion and spirituality using data from a 2012 general social survey. The study revealed that over 66% of the respondents noted being moderately or very spiritual, with only 11% noting they were not spiritual. Over 58% of the respondents identified as moderately or very religious, with 20% stating they were not religious. This supports the notion that religion and spirituality are not viewed the same by all people as alluded to in the earlier sections of this paper and suggests that the two are related but does not address the content attributed. Notably, Hodge (2015) further highlights the distinctive categories of religious and spiritual self-identity that usually reflect the clientele population. He

categorizes that a person can be both spiritual and religious or neither religious nor spiritual. A person can be religious, but not spiritual, or spiritual, but not religious (Crisp, 2015; Hodge, 2015). In line with the above assertions, the researchers note that it is critical for social workers to ethically adopt the relevant tools and processes that will enable them to function.

Criticism of the inclusion of spirituality, culture, and religion into the helping profession

As far as the inclusion of spirituality, culture, and religion are concerned, some scholars have concerns that social work interventions would be based on religious beliefs rather than social work values, and clients may become victims, despite the importance of inclusion, reservations, and barriers to its inclusion in practice (Crisp, 2015). According to Crisp (2015), social workers may maintain a separation between their personal and professional values due to experiences in the past where their religious beliefs or perception of religion as oppressive undermined their expertise. Hodge (2015) cautions that social workers need to be careful when assessing clients holistically and that the client's interest should always come first. Social workers should avoid putting the client's autonomy in jeopardy by basing their practice on their spiritual values rather than ethical standards. Some of the critics base their arguments on the agency's scope of operations and donor interest. Even though social workers themselves may be keen to include these elements in the helping profession, they may face resistance from the organizations they are employed at. This simply implies that even though social workers acknowledge the relevance of spirituality and religion, they may worry that it may not translate into their work environment because some agencies prohibit the wearing or displaying of religious symbols and the discussion of religions and spirituality. Professionally, social workers are generally aware of the need to avoid projecting their own beliefs onto others because doing so may violate a person's right to self-determination. For this reason, even though some social workers pray with clients, it may be considered unprofessional (Crisp, 2015). Therefore, more training and ethical guidance regarding the integration of religion and spirituality into practice must be given.

Scholars such as Reve (1995) and Thabede (2008) contend that there are some commonalities among societies on what is understood to be African spirituality, religion, and the cultural way of doing things. The authors identify the following commonalities: cosmology, belief systems, epistemological systems, rites of passage, forms of marriage, music, dance, and the history of colonisation and domination by European nations. Moreover, Thabede (2008) and Schele (2000) state that all African societies have some belief in the supernatural – belief in ancestors; the custom of a bride living at the home of her husband's father; polygamous marriage; prohibitions on mating with close kin; the incest taboo; and a universal sense of dependence on the supernatural

being.

Building on the above-mentioned assertions of the authors, it is clear that we have diversified cultures and the way we interpret our experiences which are closely linked to each other. Moreover, Fong (2004), Pellebon (2007), and Yunong and Xiong (2012) emphasize that social workers should be aware that, like all cultures, African culture is dynamic, but it also possesses fundamental characteristics that have withstood colonization and the test of time. Even though some Africans have become Christians, there are still occasions when they will act by their cultural norms. They may visit the cemetery to communicate with their departed family members who have become ancestors in addition to attending church to worship. Sometimes it seems like Africans manage contradictions by including seemingly contradictory things in their lives. For instance, they may take a specific issue to church, to the ancestors, to a helping professional, and to traditional healers all at the same time and social workers should be aware of all these dynamics.

Spiritual assessment

As previously explained, spiritual assessment should be done initially in an open-ended manner as part of holistic assessment to determine whether the client is interested, ready, and comfortable to include spirituality in the helping process. If spirituality is relevant to the client, then it should be assessed whether it should be included directly in the social worker's helping activity, whether referral to another resource would be appropriate, or whether the client prefers just to have some suggestions and referral to resources in order to pursue this on their own. There are many methods for spiritual assessment available, such as implicit assessment, brief explicit assessment, spiritual genogram and ecogram, spiritual development timeline, and differential assessment of spiritual crises versus severe mental disorders (Canda, Furman & Canda, 2020).

Non-directional spiritual assessment

Hodge and Holtrop (2002) advocate for non-directional spiritual assessment which involves asking questions that are open-ended, non-directive, and exploratory, without using terms that are explicit about religion or spirituality. These are useful in many contexts because they do not presume that the clients or social workers involved have any beliefs and terminology. Responses by clients determine decisions about whether and how to pursue spirituality further.

The following are examples of implicit strengths-oriented spiritual assessment questions as adopted from Hodge and Holtrop (2002). Questions should be phrased to fit the situation and the perspective of the client. It is necessary to adapt assessment questions to identify the nature of negative experiences, how they affect the client's view about including or excluding

spirituality in helping, and whether the client would like assistance in exploring possibilities for spiritual practices and resources that could be used as strengths in dealing with negative prior experiences and developing new positive experiences.

Hodge and Holtrop (2002) advise that a minimum of three areas should be explored: denomination of faith, spiritual belief, and spiritual practices. It may be that the social worker merely conducts this initial assessment and finds that spirituality or religiosity does not play a dominant role in a client's life. However, if spirituality or religiosity is key, a more comprehensive assessment would be required (Flanagan, 2009). The researcher found the following questions from the Joint Commission as cited by Hodge and Holtrop (2002) and Hodge (2000) appropriate as a guideline for understanding the client's spirituality; however, the discussion does not have to be limited to just these questions. The questions were slightly adjusted to fit into the context of this paper.

- Who or what provides you with strength and hope?
- Do you use prayer in your life?
- How would you describe your spirituality?
- How would you describe your philosophy of life?
- What type of spiritual/religious support do you desire?
- What does suffering mean to you?
- What does dying mean to you?
- What are your spiritual goals?
- Do church or ancestors play a role in your life?
- How does faith help you to cope with illness?
- How has illness (physical or mental) or addiction affected you and your family?
- Is religion or faith an important part of your life?
- How has faith influenced your past and present?
- Are you part of a spiritual or faith community?
- Are there any spiritual needs you would like to explore or discuss?
- What role do you think spirituality plays in the challenge you are experiencing?
- How do you think spirituality would play a role in resolving the challenge?

Adopted and adjusted from Hodge and Holtrop (2002)

The suggested questions above are not cast in stone but are rather guidelines. The context and environment will always determine how and when they may be asked depending on the problem experienced by clients. Moreover, other authors such as Curtis and Davis are not in favor of asking open-ended questions during the initial phase but prefer direct questions such as "Do you have any spiritual or religious beliefs?" They argue that this will allow the client to answer yes or no, and will allow the social worker to move on in case the answer is no. If an open-ended question is asked the client may feel pressured to indicate that they do have spiritual or religious views even if they do not

consider them important. The historian assessment tool below is important when assessing clients who are both spiritually and religiously inclined.

1. Assessing spiritual early spiritual interventions A. Early spiritual influences

- “What were your family’s spiritual or religious practices when you were growing up?”
- “Can you describe any early spiritual experiences or teachings that were significant to you?”

B. Formative years

- “How did your spiritual or religious views change during your teenage years?”
- “Where there any individuals or experiences that significantly influenced your spiritual beliefs during this time?”

C. Adulthood

- “What are your current spiritual or religious practices? How do they fit into your daily life?”
- “Have there been any major life events that have had a significant impact on your spiritual beliefs or practices?”

D. Recent developments and future aspirations

- “Have there been any recent changes in your spiritual practices or beliefs? What influenced these changes?”
- “What are your spiritual goals or aspirations moving forward?”

2. Assessing impact and integration

A. Impact on well-being

- “How do you use your spirituality or religion to help you manage stress or difficult situations?”
- “Do you have a spiritual or religious community that provides you with support?”

B. Strengths and resources

- “What strengths do you draw from your spirituality or religion that help you navigate life’s challenges?”
- “Are there community resources or groups that you find supportive in your spiritual journey?”

3. Developing interventions and goals

A. Integrative approach

- **Assist the clients in developing strategies** to integrate their spiritual practices into the overall care plan. This may include connecting them with spiritual resources or communities.
- **Holistic care:** The social worker should ensure that the interventions respect and align with the client’s spiritual values and incorporate them into their therapeutic plan.

B. Assist the clients in setting both long- and short-term goals.

- **Short-term goals:** Set immediate goals related to re-establishing or deepening spiritual practices.
- **Long-term goals:** Establish longer-term goals for spiritual growth and integration into the client’s life and treatment plan.

4. Follow-up and review

- Schedule follow-up sessions to assess the client’s progress in integrating spiritual practices and achieving their goals.
- Be flexible and willing to adapt the plan based on the client’s evolving needs and insights.

The following are some of the questions you may consider.

- “How have you been integrating your spiritual practices into your daily life since our last session?”
- “Have there been any changes in your spiritual needs or goals that we should address?”

Historian spiritual/religious assessment tool

Religious/spiritual historian tool

According to Hodge and Holtrop (2002), religious/spiritual history assessments are closely related to implicit or non-directive assessment methods as another more formal tool to facilitate inquiry about an individual’s spiritual or religious history and it is one of the assessment tools that practitioners may use to evaluate spiritually or religiously inclined clients. This tool may be modified

to account for a person's race or culture. The assessment is intended to be used by social welfare practitioners, not as a client questionnaire but as a guide towards understanding the client; however, social workers and other human sciences professionals may also use it (Hodge, 2001). Practitioners are encouraged to choose and modify questions based on what they think will be most helpful. The first set of questions in this assessment examines the spiritual and religious practices of the client's original family. A spiritual history represents a narrative alternative to a spiritual life map (Hodge, 2001a). Instead of relating the client's spiritual sojourn in a diagrammatic format, their spiritual story is related verbally. In a process that is analogous to conducting a family history, the client is provided an interactive forum to share their spiritual life story. The aim is to help clients tell their stories, typically moving from childhood to the present. Included are inquiries about whether they were brought up in a spiritual or religious tradition, and if the response is yes, then more inquiries or questions may follow (Hodge, 2001). The following questions may be explored by social workers when assessing clients using this method.

Cultural assessment

Culture is evidenced in human behavior and relates to thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. A culturally competent practitioner should understand the worldview and culture of a family. Practitioners should have specific knowledge of the cultural diversity of the client together with knowledge of relevant historical influences. In addition, they should have specific skills and knowledge of intervention techniques to provide an effective assessment and intervention service that recognizes cultural factors in all families. This requires knowledge and understanding of families' cultural norms, and how these influence the attitude and behavior of the clients. The following cultural assessment tool may be used by social workers when helping culturally inclined clients.

Cultural formulation interview (CFI) in social work

The cultural formulation interview (CFI) aims to understand the client's cultural background and how it influences their mental health, experiences, and treatment preferences. As such it is aimed at assuring the client that the information shared will be confidential and used to tailor interventions to their cultural context. The CFI consists of several sections that focus on different aspects of the client's cultural experience. Each section involves specific questions designed to elicit information about the client's cultural background, beliefs, and experiences. As with other assessment tools, the social worker needs to be sensitive to the fact that not all clients subscribe to culture. However, it is important to allow clients to feel comfortable if they regard

culture as a significant component of their life. Social workers need to cover the following as part of their cultural assessment.

Focus area	Question(s)	Objective /aim
Cultural identity and background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about your cultural background and identity? • How do you identify in terms of ethnicity, religion, or other cultural factors? • What language(s) do you speak? • How comfortable are you communicating in English or other languages? 	<p>These questions help the social worker to understand the client's self-identified cultural groups and how these identities shape their worldview. Assessment of language preferences assists in identifying potential communication barriers.</p>
Cultural meaning, explanations of symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you understand or describe the problems or symptoms you are experiencing? • Are there cultural explanations for these experiences? • Are there cultural beliefs or practices that you think may be affecting your mental health? • For example, how do you view mental health problems in your culture? 	<p>Here the social worker explores how the client interprets their symptoms within their cultural context and also identifies cultural beliefs or practices that may influence the client's mental health and treatment.</p>
Cultural stressors and supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What cultural or social stressors are affecting you right now? • What impact are these stressors having on your mental health? • What cultural or community resources do you rely on for support? • How do these support systems help you manage stress or mental health challenges? 	<p>Here the social worker seeks to identify specific cultural or social stressors contributing to the client's difficulties and explore the client's use of cultural or community support systems and how these resources can be incorporated into their treatment plan.</p>
Cultural formulation and treatment/intervention planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What types of treatment or interventions would you prefer that take your cultural background into account? • Are there any specific cultural practices or beliefs that should be considered in your treatment plan? • What are your goals for treatment, and how do you see your cultural background influencing these goals? • Are there specific cultural values or practices that you want to incorporate into your treatment? 	<p>Developing a treatment or intervention plan assists in determining the preferred treatment approaches and necessary adaptations to align with the client's cultural beliefs and practices. It also assists with intervention goals that respect and incorporate the client's cultural values and preferences.</p>

Documenting the findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you finding the current approach to your treatment? Does it feel respectful and aligned with your cultural background? • Are there any changes or additional cultural considerations you think we should address? 	Document the key findings from each section of the interview. This includes the client's cultural identity, understanding their symptoms, stressors, support systems, and preferences for treatment.
Follow-up and review		Integrate the cultural formulation into the client's overall treatment plan. Ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate and tailored to the client's unique needs. Be open to feedback from the client about how well the treatment aligns with their cultural needs and make necessary modifications.

3. Recommendations

The effective assessment of clients in social work requires a nuanced understanding of their cultural, religious, and spiritual contexts. These dimensions significantly influence clients' identities, behaviours, and coping mechanisms. To enhance the quality of assessments, social workers must adopt culturally, religiously, and spiritually sensitive practices. This section provides evidence-based recommendations to improve social work assessments, fostering a more holistic and inclusive approach.

Continuous education and training of social workers are crucial to enhancing cultural competence. Social workers should engage in ongoing education and training focused on cultural competence. This includes attending workshops, seminars, and courses that address the cultural dynamics of diverse populations. Such training enhances social workers' ability to recognize and respect cultural differences, reducing the likelihood of cultural misunderstandings and biases (Lum, 2004). Moreover, the focus should also be on the use of culturally sensitive assessment tools. Social workers should utilize assessment tools specifically designed to capture cultural nuances. Instruments like the culturagram help social workers systematically explore various cultural factors, including language, immigration status, and cultural norms. These tools provide a structured framework for understanding clients' cultural backgrounds and integrating this knowledge into assessments (Congress, 2004). Notably, Tervalon & Murray-García (1998) advise that emphasis should also be on cultural humility and self-reflection which involves recognizing an individual's own cultural biases and limitations. Social workers should engage in regular self-reflection and seek feedback from clients and colleagues to identify and

address personal biases. This reflective practice fosters a more open and respectful approach to client interactions.

Integrating religious sensitivity as part of comprehensive religious assessment is critical. This requires social workers to conduct thorough religious assessments to understand clients' religious beliefs and practices, and their impact on clients' lives. Tools like the FICA Spiritual History tool, ecomaps, life maps, and others should be considered during the assessment to provide a structured method for exploring clients' religious backgrounds and how these influence their coping strategies and support systems (Puchalski, 2000).

Moreover, building knowledge of various religions is encouraged and such social workers should strive to increase their knowledge of different religious traditions and practices. This can be achieved through reading, attending religious services, and participating in interfaith dialogues. A broader understanding of diverse religious contexts allows social workers to better appreciate clients' perspectives and needs (Sherwood, 2012). Hodge (2015) encourages social workers to collaborate with religious leaders and organizations to enhance their understanding of clients' religious contexts. These collaborations can provide valuable insights and resources, facilitating more effective support and interventions for clients (Hodge, 2005).

Chiefly, addressing spiritual dimensions by incorporating spiritual assessments should be a routine part of the overall client evaluation process. Social workers can use different tools to understand clients' spiritual beliefs and needs to help in identifying the role of spirituality in clients' lives and how it influences their well-being (Anandarajah & Hight, 2001). Moreover, social workers should create and foster a supportive environment where clients feel comfortable discussing their spiritual beliefs. This involves demonstrating openness, respect, and empathy towards clients' spiritual perspectives, which can enhance trust and rapport (Canda & Furman, 2010). Social workers should incorporate clients' spiritual resources into their interventions. This could include encouraging spiritual practices, connecting clients with spiritual communities, or considering spiritual perspectives in goal setting and treatment planning (Hodge, 2015).

Improving the assessment of clients in social work requires a comprehensive and sensitive approach to cultural, religious, and spiritual dimensions. By enhancing cultural competence, integrating religious sensitivity, and addressing spiritual needs, social workers can provide more holistic and effective support to clients. These recommendations emphasize the importance of continuous education, self-reflection, and the use of specialized assessment tools in fostering a more inclusive practice. Future research should continue to explore and refine these strategies, ensuring that social work assessments remain responsive to the diverse needs of clients.

4. Concluding remarks

Holistic social work assessment, incorporating cultural and spiritual dimensions, is crucial for effective client intervention and cultural competence. Integrating spirituality and religion into social work practice requires addressing biases, promoting critical reflective practice, and acknowledging the significance of cultural competence and anti-discrimination. Assessment tools like genograms can be adapted to understand family dynamics and the influence of spirituality on individuals, emphasizing the role of spirituality in the biopsychosocial assessment of clients. Furthermore, the development of assessment scales for educators and the importance of training students to integrate clients' religious and spiritual beliefs in practice highlight the need for comprehensive approaches that embrace the spiritual dimension in social work education and client interventions.

Integrating spirituality, religion, and culture into social work assessments requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach. Social workers should employ culturally and spiritually sensitive tools and frameworks, such as the biopsychosocial spiritual model, to capture the multifaceted nature of clients' lives (Hodge, 2015). Training programmes and continued education in cultural and spiritual competence are also crucial for preparing social workers to effectively assess and support diverse client populations (Canda & Furman, 2010). Incorporating spirituality, religion, and culture into the assessment of social work clients is imperative for holistic and effective practice. The literature underscores the importance of understanding and integrating these dimensions to enhance client outcomes and promote social justice. Future research should continue to explore best practices and develop standardized assessment tools that account for the diverse spiritual, religious, and cultural backgrounds of clients.

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