A Qualitative Study of Women Therapists’ Experiences of Spirituality in the Counseling Process

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN THERAPISTS' EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE COUNSELING PROCESS

by

Sharon A. Carney

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Sharon A. Carney
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CHAPTER I
MY STORY

This dissertation grows out of my identity as a woman whose spirituality is core to her being. On my own spiritual journey, I have spent considerable time seeking out and reading about or listening to the stories of women's spiritual paths and how they have unfolded. Through their stories, I have come to realize that I too have a story and I have grown in my desire to give voice to it.

To read about other women's spiritual journeys, rituals, and experiences of spirituality in their lives validates what I have known at the core of my being. This is a knowing that my spirituality is not just a part or segment of my life that can be separated off. Rather, it is an integral part of who I am as a whole being, interconnected and interwoven, inextricable from all aspects of me. In examining my identity, particularly as a woman and feminist, as well as my cultural and ethnic background, I have come to realize that all of these dimensions of who I am are intertwined with my spirituality. My journey more recently has involved focusing on various dimensions of my identity that have deep spiritual ties for me, and I cannot consider or reflect on these aspects of myself without touching on spirituality. Although at times quite painful, I believe it has been my spirituality that has allowed me to grow into the woman that I am today and to begin to examine and value parts of myself that I had previously been afraid to embrace. Just as my journey with regard to my identity as a woman and feminist is deeply spiritual, so too is my journey in awareness of other aspects of my identity, including my identity as a therapist.
Before expanding on spirituality and my identity as a therapist, I would like to share some important influences on my spiritual life. I grew up in a conservative Catholic family and attended Catholic grade school and high school. In reflecting on growing up Catholic, I have come to realize that my early exposure to religion seemed more about oppression, shame and guilt, with compassion and love, key elements in my own spirituality, as secondary. It angers and saddens me to reflect on my past and know that I learned how to silence myself through shame and that compassion was something of which I believed I would never be worthy. I can recall praying that I would become a good person, feeling inside all the while that I could never possibly be “good enough.”

This ties into my gender identity, not understanding as a child why I, as a girl who would someday be a woman, was unworthy of taking on leadership roles in the church. I did not understand why women could not be priests and why so many of the people we learned about in religion class were men, when, in so many of my personal experiences, it had been women who truly taught me about love and spirituality in their daily lives. I also had difficulty, at a young age, understanding why we were being taught in religion class the importance of converting others to Catholicism. I can recall thinking, “But what about Gandhi—surely he won’t be going to hell and he’s not a Catholic,” and knowing at a very deep level that the perspective that Catholicism is the only true path to God did not fit with my own truth. Throughout the years, I have maintained my admiration of Gandhi, as well as the perspective that there are many spiritual paths, none more worthy, right or deserving than any of the others.

Ironically, it was also my experience in Catholic school that opened my eyes to broader perspectives. I attended an all female high school that was surprisingly liberal.
and diverse, not only racially, but also religiously despite its Catholic affiliation. During high school, I began to recognize the privileges I was afforded as a white person and to witness the pain of racism. I thus began a journey that I continue today as I challenge myself on issues of diversity, examine my role in oppression, and seek to understand the worldviews of others. My high school experience also empowered me to begin to question gender role expectations and to view myself as a strong, independent woman, thus strengthening my journey as a feminist. I also learned that right and wrong were not so well-defined, and that spirituality was broader than the Catholic perspective of my childhood.

In reflecting on my Catholic upbringing, it amazes me how much my perspective has grown, embracing both the nourishing aspects of my experience with Catholicism, as well as the anger and hurt. The Catholic devotion to the Blessed Mother, as modeled by my grandparents, has been a source of comfort to me over the years and has been a deeply feminine spiritual connection for me. Likewise, the role of ritual in the church has made me aware of the place ritual holds in my life around what is sacred and has inspired me to reclaim and create rituals to mark what is sacred in my own life and experience. Catholicism is a link to my family, often causing much pain as I do not embrace this religion in the manner that they would wish; however it remains a part of me, not in practice, but in the role it has played in shaping who I am today.

There indeed has been much anger and hurt in my experience with Catholicism. As much as I tend to avoid or be intimidated by anger, I also recognize that it has the power to motivate and to make me take action. My anger surrounding Catholicism centers around messages of oppression, shame and guilt, especially regarding the
Catholic Church's stance on women and on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. I cannot comprehend how the Vatican can issue a statement asserting that gay or lesbian parents with children bring violence to the family. It makes me painfully aware that the Catholic Church blatantly overlooks the violence it perpetrates on LGBT people as well as the violence it does toward women and children with its patriarchal messages and power structure.

This anger has served as a source of motivation for me over the past several years to reflect on my spirituality and the religion in which I was raised. In a discussion last winter, I was told that I am not a very spiritual person. I found my voice then and stated that I was indeed a spiritual person, just not a very Catholic person. This seems to hold true for me. I have found that right now I do not need to identify as being Catholic or a member of any other organized religion in order to embrace my spirituality, and although I have struggled and continue to struggle, I find myself becoming more spiritually grounded.

In examining what grounds me spiritually, I know it has much to do with feminism, nature, and art. I say that my spirituality is impacted by feminism, but it may be that my identity as a feminist has been impacted by my spirituality. Both are so core to who I am that perhaps they developed together, with one informing the other, so that now to talk about spirituality, I cannot do so without reverence for the feminine, and to talk about feminism, I cannot do so without experiencing a deep sense of spiritual connection. The importance of relationships and the relational nature of women is a central idea in feminism and it is also central to my own spiritual perspective. For me, it is my sense of connection to something larger than myself, to the universe, as well as to all other living
beings, that is core to my spirituality and helps to ground me. This interconnectedness of all living beings and sense of belonging in the universe is something I have known and felt intuitively throughout my life, and though at times I struggle and feel disconnected, it is ultimately this awareness of connection that sustains me in my daily life.

It is in nature that I am most often reminded of this connection and of the divine beauty present in all beings. Since I was a young child, I have always felt comfort and connection with nature. My favorite sanctuary as a child was the maple tree in our backyard. I was the only one of my siblings able to climb the tree, and I spent countless hours cradled in its branches. Over the years, the tree heard many stories and held my most secret thoughts and feelings. It provided me with comfort, safety, and a sense of belonging in the world. A few summers ago, my grandmother and I sat on her porch, and she told me that if we listened, we could hear the trees talking. I don’t doubt that. It seems that she and I both share a connection to nature, a connection that helped me to feel even more connected to her. As an adult, I continue to feel a deep sense of spirituality in nature. Indeed, one of the most powerful spiritual experiences I had was one winter when I was hiking in Sedona with my closest friend. Sitting among the red rocks, I felt held by the earth and connected to the universe in such a deep way that I cannot find words to explain—it was an experience of connection felt at the core of my being. And again, that connection to nature, to the universe, to the divine, deepened my connection to my friend in being able to share that experience with her and experiencing the gift of her presence along my spiritual path.

I have also mentioned that art has helped to ground me spiritually. It was in taking a holistic health class several summers ago that I was reminded of the important role art
has played in my life. During that time, much of my thoughts and feelings as I reflected on my spiritual journey and asked questions about the meaning of life and my purpose in life were expressed in the artwork I did, which also empowered me to connect with myself and with others at a deeper level. This was not my first experience with the power of artwork. As a child, I spent hours with my grandmother, drawing and creating on paper what I held in my heart. Not only did she instill in me a love for the creative arts, but more importantly she taught me about the art of living. Through her example, I learned about compassion, integrity, and about recognizing and appreciating the sacred nature of every person. Even now, doing artwork helps to put me back in touch with this gift that she has shared with me.

Over the years, I have grown spiritually. I have come to embrace a spirituality that is affirming, rather than shaming, of all aspects of who I am. I also recognize that I still struggle spiritually at times and that I believe my sense of spirituality is continually growing and evolving. More recently, I am coming to recognize the impact of the readings and teachings I have listened to on Buddhism on my spiritual beliefs and practices. I have found meditation to be an important part of my spiritual practice, and teachings about compassion, suffering, lovingkindness, and impermanence speak deeply to me and have impacted how I relate to myself and others. In embracing a spirituality that is affirming of me and the various aspects of my identity, I have also come to recognize that my spirituality is intertwined with my role as a therapist, and as such has impacted how I work with clients in the counseling process. The Dalai Lama (1999) states,

Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit –such
as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which bring happiness to both self and others... Thus spiritual practice according to this description involves, on the one hand, acting out of concern for others' well-being. On the other, it entails transforming ourselves so that we become more readily disposed to do so. (p. 22-23)

In reading the Dalai Lama’s conceptualization of spirituality, I was moved that it fit so naturally with the way I experience spirituality in my own life and particularly in my role as a therapist.

As my spirituality is core to my being, it stands that it is interconnected to who I am as a therapist. I do believe that the therapy process and the therapeutic relationship are sacred, and for me are connected to my sense of spirituality. In preparing to meet with clients, meditating has helped to ground me and to center myself so that I can be more fully present with clients during session. Trusting myself as a therapist and listening to my intuition has been a more recent area of growth for me that I connect to becoming more in tune to myself spiritually. In the past, I had been quick to doubt myself; however now I am beginning to appreciate that I need to listen to myself, as I often have valuable insight about myself and my relationships with others that can guide me in my interactions. To me, listening to my inner knowing, rather than dismissing it, has been a source of energy, affirmation, and guidance.

Much of my sense of spirituality is based on connection to the universe and to other living beings, and likewise, in my own approach to therapy, I emphasize connectedness through the therapeutic relationship, and I view the connection in
relationship as sacred and healing. I seek to create a safe place where the client can feel heard and valued and where the client can share painful emotions. My spirituality and sense of connection to something larger than myself helps me in being open to the client’s emotions and in holding the client’s pain, thus serving as a source of support and strength for both myself and the client. Likewise, I have begun to incorporate Buddhist notions about compassion and the idea of naming, welcoming, and allowing emotions and thoughts to pass through rather than criticizing them or trying to avoid them into the work that I do with clients.

My spiritual grounding in nature is evident in my office environment, which has plants, pictures of trees and water, and stones, pinecones, and leaves that can be looked at or held. This helps to center me and hopefully creates a peaceful, calming environment for clients. Artwork is also an element in my spirituality that connects to my work as a therapist. For many clients, it is through art, music, or writing that they are able to convey their innermost thoughts and emotions, and it is truly an honor when a client is willing to share such personal work with me. I acknowledge the sacredness of their art and the trust they have placed in me by sharing it. Often, clients’ art becomes an integral part of our work together. Not only does it provide insight into the client’s emotions, it also serves to deepen our relationship and opens the door to talk about the process of our interactions. Likewise, artwork plays a role for me in processing my work with clients. It is through my connection to the divine, primarily through meditation, being in nature, and creating art, that I am able to hold the pain that clients share with me and hold and process my own pain as well.
In my experiences as a client, I have also witnessed spirituality within the counseling process, primarily in the form of ritual. As my therapist and I began to work on some particularly difficult issues, I brought a candle to session and explained to my therapist that I felt that I was in need of light as I planned to talk about some especially dark topics that day. This unfolded into a ritual of lighting my candle at the beginning of each session, and, at the end of each session, setting an intention and blowing it out together. I needed a tangible reminder of my spirituality in session, and this ritual became a source of support and connection in our therapeutic relationship.

The Dalai Lama (1999) speaks of spirituality as being about transforming oneself. I believe this holds true in therapy as well and is part of what makes therapy to me so deeply sacred and spiritual, both from my experiences as a therapist and as a client. In working so closely with another and being vulnerable and open, experiencing connection, compassion and empathy, one cannot help but be transformed. My work with clients and my work as a client have indeed changed me at a deep level, helping me to become more open and compassionate towards myself, as well as more open and compassionate towards others. I am continually amazed and in awe of how deeply spiritual the therapy process can be and am grateful for the honor of being part of such a transformative, empowering, and sacred experience in my own life and in the lives of the clients with whom I work.

It is from these experiences with spirituality and the counseling process that I began to wonder more about the experiences of other therapists, in particular women therapists. In my reading, I have learned that there is considerable room to ask the questions that I intend to ask in this study, as there has not been extensive research in the
area of spirituality and counseling process. In this dissertation, I interviewed women therapists about their experiences of spirituality in the counseling process and how their spirituality influences the work that they do as therapists. Thus, out of my own spiritual journey grew this dissertation topic. I am excited about the opportunity to give voice to my own story and to the stories of other women therapists in an area where the stories told by women, about women, and for women have been scarce.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore women therapists’ experiences of spirituality as a component of the counseling process. This study is qualitative in nature and is grounded in a feminist approach to research. A hallmark of feminist research is that the researcher, “...in her formulation, must refuse to put aside her experience and, indeed, must make her bodily existence and activity a ‘starting point’ for inquiry” (DeVault, 1999, p. 39). As illuminated in chapter one, this dissertation does indeed stem from my “bodily existence and activity;” it is rooted in my own experiences as a woman therapist whose spirituality is core to my existence and intertwined with all aspects of who I am, including my identity as a therapist. The present chapter links my experiences to existing counseling literature, situates the research topic within feminist and multicultural perspectives in counseling, and critically reviews existing literature focused specifically on spirituality and the counseling process.

In the present study, spirituality is conceptualized as a counseling process variable. According to Hill and Williams (2000), counseling process “...refers to overt and covert thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of both clients and therapists during therapy sessions” (p. 670). Lambert and Hill (1994) state that counseling process includes therapist and client interactions during treatment. Counseling process research is conducted to provide answers to the following questions: “What goes on in therapy? What works in therapy? What can therapists do to help clients?” (Hill & Williams, 2000, p. 670). Thus, studying how women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling
process and how the spirituality of women therapists appear in the work that they do as therapists can help to provide answers to the questions posed by Hill and Williams. According to Lambert and Hill, it is hoped that the results of counseling process research will lead therapists to become more effective in helping clients. Likewise, it is my hope that my research on spirituality and the counseling process will provide information that will assist therapists in becoming more effective in helping clients.

The idea that spirituality is a potentially important aspect of counseling is supported in theoretical and conceptual counseling literature. Corey (2001) states that addressing spirituality can enhance the therapy process in that, “Spiritual/religious values have a major part to play in human life and struggles, which means that exploring these values has a great deal to do with providing solutions for clients’ struggles.” (p. 462). Spirituality and therapy both place emphasis on finding meaning and purpose in life, the relationship between spiritual well-being and general psychological functioning, and the role spirituality can play as a source of healing to be drawn upon in therapy (Aponte, 2002; Corey, 2001; Ganje-Fling, & McCarthy, 1996; Jankowski, 2002; Perlstein, 2001; Weiner, 2001). Within the literature, therapy itself has been conceptualized as a spiritual process (Benjamin & Looby; 1998; Cornett, 1998; Perlstein, 2001; West, 1998), and spirituality has been considered an integral component of the therapeutic relationship (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). Spirituality has also been linked to psychological development and well-being, particularly for survivors of trauma (Ganje-Fling, Veach, Kuang, & Houg, 2000; Reinert & Smith, 1997; Ryan, 1998; Weber & Cummings, 2003). Thus, the exploration of spiritual issues and the use of spirituality as a potential resource in counseling seem to be worthy of further study.
This study is also informed by feminist therapy. Central to presenting an argument for integrating feminist theory and counseling is the realization that contemporary counseling theories and techniques have been created based on a view of mental health where male traits and behaviors are considered the norm and female traits and behaviors are considered deficient (Brabeck & Brown, 1997; Herlihy & Corey, 2001; Worell & Remer, 2003). According to Herlihy & Corey (2001), “The majority of clients in counseling are women, and the majority of psychotherapy practitioners at the master’s level are women. Thus, the need for a theory that evolves from the thinking and experiencing of women seems self-evident” (p. 343). Feminist therapy provides a framework in which therapists can organize their assumptions about the therapeutic process, providing a set of values for guiding and evaluating practice (Enns, 2004; Worell & Remer, 2003), essential ingredients to effective and ethical therapy.

Central to feminist therapy is that the therapist values the experiences of all women, addressing their multiple dimensions of identity, and honoring their personal worldviews (Cammaert & Larsen, 1988; Enns, 2004; Greene & Sanchez-Hucles, 1997; Worell & Remer, 2003). Likewise, literature also provides a rationale for integrating feminist theory and counseling based on the concept of making the personal political, which is a fundamental tenet in feminism, emphasizing that women’s personal problems are connected to their oppressed status and cannot be addressed without considering the politics of the larger society (Cammaert & Larsen, 1988; Enns, 1993; Worell & Remer, 2003). Thus, by incorporating feminism into counseling, an approach can be used that advocates for social justice and honors women’s experiences and perceptions of the world.
Literature on women and spirituality indicates that for many women, spiritual experiences are central to their worldviews. Yet women’s experiences and understandings of spirituality have been neglected throughout history. Christ (1980), a feminist theologian, talked about her perspective on theological issues as a student of theology being negated as theology tends to be written from a male perspective; indeed, a perspective that often renders women invisible (Henehan, 2003; Ochs, 1997). Throughout history, women have learned about spirituality from the experiences and reality of men. “In almost all accounts of the sacred, both language and story have been the expressions of men conveyed in male imagery” (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p. 7). Borysenko (1999) identifies the tendency to assume that spiritual exercises and systems developed by men and for men are equally applicable to women and critiques this assumption as being unacceptable. Indeed, Anderson and Hopkins cite Carol Gilligan’s (1982) work on female moral development as inspiration for their exploration of female spiritual development. They explain that just as we need to learn about women’s moral development from studying women rather than applying standards derived from the study of men, so too do we need to learn about women’s spirituality and spiritual development from studying women and the way they experience spirituality and the sacred in their lives. The impact of failing to make visible and give voice to the experiences of women is costly.

If what some of us experience is not taken seriously, is misnamed or remains unnamed, and is not given a place in a vision of reality, three things can happen: (a.) we stop having that experience and thereby lose some of life; (b.) we become estranged from our own experience and live inauthentically; and (c.) we contort
ourselves in an effort to make our experience conform to what counts as a 'real experience’ in the prevailing system. (Ochs, 1997, p. 24)

It is thus imperative that attention is given to women’s own experiences of spirituality, in our own voices, from our own perspectives.

Authors focusing on women and spirituality have called for the sharing of women’s stories and have begun to give voice to feminine perspectives on spirituality (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Borysenko, 1999; Bruchac, Hogan, & McDaniel, 1986; Christ, 1980; Henehan, 2003; Ochs, 1997; Plaskow & Christ, 1989). The importance of stories as they relate to women and to spirituality is eloquently articulated by Christ.

Women’s stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expression of women’s spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women’s stories. If women’s stories are not told, the depth of women’s souls will not be known. (Christ, 1980, p. 1)

According to Christ, stories can serve to reveal the powers that provide orientation and meaning to the flow of life and can foster the creation of a sense of self and of the world.

Women’s stories of spirituality, in their transformative power, are connected to the therapy process in that the therapy process likewise holds the power to transform by empowering women to give voice to their stories in a supportive and accepting
relationship. Anderson and Hopkins (1991) interviewed over 100 women across North America from a variety of spiritual or religious paths, seeking to learn about how these women’s lives have developed, how they have experienced turning points in their spiritual development, and attempting to identify common elements in the stories of these women’s relationships with the divine. Anderson and Hopkins referred to this process of sharing stories as being transformative, empowering women to give voice to their own experiences and to come to know their own truths by speaking and being heard. A theme present in many of the stories and in research about women and spirituality is the sacredness of relationship and the role of being in relation to others in spiritual development (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Borysenko, 1999; Ochs, 2003; Plaskow & Christ, 1989). “Relationship that does not separate and divide but connects and brings together spirit and flesh, human beings and other forms of life, God and matter, is precisely what women described to us as the heart of the spiritual in their lives” (Anderson & Hopkins, p. 17). Likewise, emphasis on spiritual growth as a process and quest for wholeness are themes present in women’s stories (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Christ, 1980). This process of striving for wholeness and connection with others that is present in women’s accounts of their spiritual experiences and growth can be tied to the therapy process as well.

Emphasis on a healing, collaborative relationship is reflected in the literature on feminist psychology. Miller and Stiver (1997) emphasize a relational approach to therapy in which the connection between client and therapist is authentic and growth fostering for both. It is through mutually empathic and mutually empowering connections to others that we are able to grow. Likewise, connections between feminism and spirituality exist.
in the recognition of the patriarchal influence on traditional views of spirituality as well as in the attempt to reclaim the feminine in spirituality by focusing on lived experiences, relationships, connections with others and nature, and personal meaning-making (Ballou, 1995; Funderburk & Fukuyama, 2001; Hunt, 1995; Perlstein, 2001; Weiner, 2001). Ballou states that psychological theories and practices that are grounded in women’s experiences and relationships and that emphasize empathy as a mutual connection are nearing the spiritual domain. These qualities are all aspects of feminism. Feminist theory advocates a relational approach to therapy in which the connection between client and therapist is collaborative, authentic and growth fostering for both, and empathy is seen as an experience of mutual connection essential to healing (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Funderburk & Fukuyama, 2001; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Likewise, literature pertaining to spirituality emphasizes the spiritual connection between the counselor and client within the therapeutic relationship as sacred and healing (Benjamin & Looby, 1998). Consistent with this perspective on spirituality and the therapeutic relationship is the focus on connectedness with others and with the universe, with relationships being considered spiritual (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Jankowski, 2002; Perlstein, 2001; Weiner, 2001), as well as the feminist perspective that the healing power of connection expands beyond the relationship between the therapist and client to include the larger community (Ballou, 1995).

The integration of spirituality and feminist approaches into counseling is also supported in the multicultural competencies identified by Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) and Arredondo and colleagues (1996), as well as by the American Psychological...
Association’s (2003) multicultural guidelines. These competencies and guidelines all acknowledge the importance of attending to issues of gender and spirituality, along with other dimensions of diversity, in therapy. Funderburk and Fukuyama (2001) emphasize that psychotherapy takes place within a socio-cultural context, and because multiculturalism, feminism, and spirituality are important forces in society, they are also influential in therapy. Thus, studying women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process can be supported from a multicultural perspective as well.

A central idea in the multicultural competencies is self-awareness of the therapist. It is emphasized that therapists be aware of their own various dimensions of identity and worldview and how this impacts the therapeutic relationship (APA, 2003; Arredondo, et al., 1996; Sue, et al., 1992). Focusing on the therapist’s perspective and experience of spirituality in the counseling process within this study is consistent with these guidelines. Furthermore, within literature pertaining to spirituality and the counseling process, the importance of therapist self-awareness and examination of personal spiritual beliefs and values, as well as examining the factors that helped to shape one’s perspective on spirituality, is emphasized (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Linnenberg, 1997; Rivett & Street, 2001; West, 1998). This awareness on the part of the therapist is vital since the therapist’s own beliefs and spiritual perspective influences how the therapist approaches therapy, ultimately impacting the therapy process itself (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Rivett & Street, 2001). Indeed, the study of the therapist’s perspective on spirituality and the counseling process is specifically called for by Hickson and colleagues (2000). Thus, focusing this current study on the perspective of the therapist is supported by
multicultural counseling literature and literature pertaining to spirituality and the counseling process.

As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, counseling process research is vital to assisting therapists in becoming more effective in helping clients, and spirituality can be considered a process variable. Literature pertaining to both feminist theory and multicultural counseling also supports additional exploration of women’s experiences of spirituality. Although review of the existing literature specific to the purposes of the present study revealed a paucity of literature pertaining to the use of spirituality as a process component in counseling, critical review of the few existing articles in this area provides additional support and context for an examination of women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process.

Spirituality and Counseling Process

An extensive review of the counseling process literature yielded only fourteen articles focused specifically on spirituality and the counseling process. Literature focusing specifically on spirituality in counseling was included, while literature with a focus on religion was not. This fits with religion and spirituality being distinct ideas, as supported by the definitions in the next section. Of the fourteen articles identified, only two are research articles and the rest are conceptual in nature. The remainder of this chapter summarizes this literature. Definitions of spirituality and its distinctiveness from religion are presented first, followed by discussion of major contributions from the conceptual literature and the research literature. Because of the scarcity of literature, identification of unifying themes across the literature was difficult. Instead, the sections pertaining to the major contributions from the conceptual literature and from the research
literature have been structured so that each article and its major concepts are presented individually. Finally, recommendations concerning areas in need of additional scholarship are provided, emphasizing the need for research focused specifically on women and spirituality.

**Defining Spirituality**

Definitions of spirituality are varied. Because of the tendency to leave out certain voices, including those of women (Christ, 1980; Henehan, 2003; Ochs, 1997), it is important to be thoughtful in examining existing literature on spirituality and counseling process. Before this literature can be considered, an understanding of how spirituality is being defined, either explicitly or implicitly, is essential. A core concern in defining spirituality is distinguishing it from religion.

In distinguishing between spirituality and religion, Weiner (2001) notes that spirituality does not need to be theistic but is central to any religion. She describes religion as the “…external form, structure and practices of a group of people that help them find meaning in living” (Weiner, 2001, p. 151). Weiner comments that religion can be a pathway to spirituality, assisting in the construction of spiritual meaning and an integrated belief system from life experiences. Likewise, Hinterkopf (1997), in her discussion of spirituality and religion, asserts that spirituality may include forms of religion but not necessarily, and she asserts that spirituality needs to be defined in a manner that is inclusive of both those who practice a formal religion or believe in a god or divine being as well as those who do not ascribe to a particular religion or who are spiritual but not theistic.

Similarly, Rivett and Street (2001) distinguish between religion and spirituality.
“Spirituality...encompasses the individual’s beliefs concerning his or her link with the universal, whereas religion is the social, organizational, and practical expression of such beliefs” (Rivett and Street, 2001, p. 460). Anderson and Worthen (1997) conceptualize spirituality as referring to the “...uniquely personal and subjective experience of a fourth dimension [beyond the dimensions of time, space, and story]...” and religion as referring to “...the specific and concrete expression of spirituality” (p. 4).

Aponte (2002) presents a definition of spirituality that emphasizes morality and interconnection among people. “Spirituality is a universal dimension of life that lends a meaning to our existence, sets a moral standard for living, and assumes some sense of moral connection among people at the very heart of our humanity” (Aponte, 2002, p. 16).

Differing from the previous conceptualizations of spirituality are those that are primarily theistic in nature. Linnenberg (1997) views religion as an expression of spirituality, and he defines spirituality as the development of an internal, personal relationship with one’s god. This definition of spirituality seems to focus primarily on perspectives that emphasize a god or higher power. Richards and Bergin (2004), present a theistic spiritual strategy for therapy. These theistic conceptualizations of spirituality can be limited in that they exclude Eastern, transpersonal, and humanistic perspectives of spirituality.

In focusing on the conceptualizations of spirituality that allow for the inclusion of both theistic and non-theistic perspectives, several unifying themes emerge. Spirituality is a deeply personal, integral part of all humans and involves a process of making meaning of one’s existence and life purpose. A relational component exists in spirituality, emphasizing connection to the universe or the divine and to other people. Spirituality is
seen as distinct from religion in that it can provide a broad framework or context for religion, and religion can serve as an expression or externalization of spirituality.

Of particular value for its inclusion of these unifying themes and for its emphasis on spiritual process in defining spirituality is Hinterkopf’s (1997) article. Hinterkopf presents a definition of spirituality that concentrates on spiritual process, thereby avoiding the restrictiveness that occurs when focusing instead on spiritual content. She emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between content and process, as focus on content can often lead to exclusion or judgment when the counselor is faced with unfamiliar spiritual content. Hinterkopf draws on Gendlin’s Theory of Experiencing in formulating her process focused definition of spirituality, which she describes as “...a subtle, bodily feeling with vague meanings that brings new, clearer meanings involving a transcendent growth process” (p. 76). Included in her conceptualization is the idea that spirituality is not merely a set of cognitive beliefs. She stresses that transcendent growth processes are not limited to involvement with a deity or divine being but instead may include transpersonal experiences, such as intuitive or mystical experiences, and involve activities and qualities such as service to others, faith, love, interconnectedness, and non-attachment, as well as struggling with existential questions. Hinterkopf emphasizes the interconnection between psychological and spiritual growth processes, commenting that a similar growth process is involved whether the content is spiritual or psychological.

Fukuyama and Sevig (1999), in their chapter related to process issues in integrating spirituality into multicultural counseling, also view spirituality and the process of therapeutic growth as being intricately interconnected. This perspective reinforces the importance of focusing on process, rather than content, when conceptualizing spirituality.
**Major Contributions from Conceptual Literature**

Much of the literature that exists regarding spirituality and counseling is focused on spiritual content or spiritual development. Less common is literature pertaining to spirituality as a process component in counseling. As noted above, Hinterkopf’s (1997) article makes a strong case for examining spirituality as a process component in counseling, rather than focusing only on spiritual content in counseling sessions. This focus fits the purpose of the present study and provides a useful framework for more detailed review of the literature.

In the paragraphs that follow, twelve conceptual pieces pertaining to spirituality as a process component in counseling are critically reviewed and major contributions from each piece are identified. This section is structured so that the eight articles or chapters utilizing a conceptualization of spirituality that includes both theistic and non-theistic perspectives are first presented, followed by four articles or chapters utilizing a conceptualization of spirituality limited to theistic perspectives.

In their chapter focusing on process issues in integrating spirituality into multicultural counseling, Fukuyama and Sevig (1999) discuss potential counselor process, client process, and client and counselor interaction issues. Emphasis is placed on the counselor’s ability to operate beyond a cognitive level and focus on being, rather than on doing or saying. Likewise, self-acceptance and comfort with one’s own spiritual journey are seen as integral components to the transformation process, and self-disclosure is identified as a component in building trust and connection with the client. Fukuyama and Sevig also emphasize the counselor’s own awareness and examination of spiritual beliefs and values.
In discussing client process issues, Fukuyama and Sevig (1999) provide examples of a client’s comments after experiencing a spiritual therapeutic process. These comments include depth in connecting with the counselor, transformation, feeling scared but also free, experiencing responsibility for self, feeling present, taking risks, and realizing that one cannot return to prior ways of being. Fukuyama and Sevig comment on the client and counselor interaction, stating that “Basic spiritual values, such as connectedness of all beings, compassion, forgiveness, and respect, all help the counseling dyad toward the goal of affirming human dignity and diversity as a vital part of existence and a vital part of becoming ‘who one is’” (p. 146). Thus, spirituality is seen as an integral component of the therapeutic relationship. Fukuyama and Sevig’s chapter is valuable in that broad concepts that are inclusive and applicable to all theoretical approaches are offered and specific process dimensions are discussed. This chapter provides a strong foundation for focusing on spirituality and counseling process.

Weiner (2001) takes a feminist perspective in discussing spirituality in the therapy process. She offers the assertion that a woman must have a sense of self and purpose, and that central to the therapy process is the integration of a belief system that is consistent with the client’s spiritual experiences and perspective and provides a framework for understanding her purpose in life. Weiner comments that the impact of disconnection from spirituality in women is often a sense of loss and lack of meaning in life. She states that this disconnection often occurs with women becoming estranged from their religions of origin because of the patriarchal nature of most of these religions. In the quote that follows, Weiner describes the role of the therapist in using spirituality as a process component in counseling.
I believe the role of the feminist therapist is to help a woman move from her child view of the universe to an adult view of the universe. The feminist therapist can assist her client in the developmental task of establishing a functional adult mode of living that includes a fulfilling life congruent with her spiritual base. She can also help a woman to develop a cosmic or terrestrial sense of connection and meaning. (Weiner, 2001, p. 153)

She illustrates how this can actually play out in therapy with a case study, and she also shares suggestions for interventions. Weiner encourages the exploration of what the client has been taught about spirituality, existential issues, and personal responsibility, as well as contradictions to what she has been taught, with the purpose of helping her to form a personal framework for living. Weiner’s emphasis on personal meaning making and feminist perspective offer an empowering conceptualization of spirituality in the therapy process.

Also written from a feminist perspective, Perlstein (2001) presents clinical examples of the use of ritual, as created by therapist and client together, as a component of a strength based approach to the therapy process. Perlstein emphasizes the power of ritual to help people honor self, connect with others, and build community based on honoring sacredness in each person. She presents examples of rituals used in her practice that have served as containers for emotion and as reminders of connection with the universe and with other people. Rituals honor the client, allowing her to be and to accept herself and others, and they help the client in holding her own pain. Perlstein emphasizes that rituals and therapy have similar qualities including empowerment, depth, focus, continuity, active participation, and expansiveness. The clinical examples described by
Perlstein provide a moving testament to the transformative power of ritual as a spiritual component in the therapy process.

In his article in which therapy is conceptualized as a spiritual process, West (1998) shares his own experiences as a clinician but first grounds them in a solid discussion of the historical context of spirituality and therapy. West acknowledges the tenuousness of the relationship between spirituality and therapy and the tendency for therapists to ignore spirituality or view it negatively; however, he also presents perspectives and approaches, including those of Jung, Rogers, and Buber, in which spirituality is recognized as therapeutic and as a need for all humans. West presents models of spiritual development, emphasizing the importance of matching forms of therapy and spiritual support to the spiritual developmental level of the client. He likewise discusses spiritual development of therapists, commenting that attending to one’s inner process while also attending to that of the client is a spiritual practice. “I discovered that other therapists and healers were moving away from dramatic forms of working, away from doing and towards being, focusing on the client unfolding and an increasing awareness that this unfolding needed to be seen as spiritual” (West, 1998, p. 173). Communicating acceptance of spirituality and allowing the client’s spiritual process to unfold while being present to the client as a witness and support are emphasized, as is the concept of being rather than doing. In drawing on prior theory and scholarship as well as in recounting his own experiences, West offers powerful support for his contention that therapy is a spiritual process.

Cornett (1998) presents a chapter on the technique of spiritually attuned psychotherapy. This technique is grounded in the person-centered approach, and as such,
emphasis is placed more on the person and relationship than on what the therapist does, so the term technique is used rather loosely. Cornett identifies major person-centered concepts, including empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, as well as curiosity, comfort with mystery, ability to tolerate chaos and hold the client’s emotions, and willingness to examine one’s own life as important qualities for therapists working with spiritual issues. He explains that because spirituality can be a difficult topic to discuss, sincere curiosity and flexibility on the part of the therapist are necessary. The role of the therapist is conceptualized as that of a companion or guide on a spiritual journey in which the process of the journey is more important than the destination.

Cornett also maintains that therapists need to listen to the client’s story with an openness to multiple realities and the ability to reflect back feelings or thoughts present in the client’s story. Cornett then illustrates the technique of spiritually attuned psychotherapy with a case example. Cornett’s approach to spirituality and therapy, although founded on a person-centered perspective, seems applicable to various theoretical orientations, and, similar to the foundation that utilizing a person-centered approach establishes for cultivating the therapeutic relationship, the technique of spiritually attuned psychotherapy seems capable of serving as a foundation for fostering spirituality within the therapeutic process.

Several articles pertaining to spirituality as a process component in counseling are written from a marriage and family therapy perspective. Anderson and Worthen (1997) identify three dimensions of experience addressed in therapy, including time, space and story, and they advocate for inclusion of spirituality as a fourth dimension. Assumptions influencing therapists who work from a spiritual perspective include viewing all people
and all human relationships as spiritual. The authors identify the purpose of their article as the exploration of the spirituality of the therapist in practice, emphasizing that one’s spirituality influences how therapy is approached. Specifically, the authors discuss how the therapist listens and responds, including listening for a spiritual process that may be occurring in other dimensions and asking questions focused on the spiritual dimension, observing with compassion the client’s process of unfolding, and responding with acceptance and compassion. It is suggested that therapists can use their own spiritual experiences to help them be open to and hold the client’s pain, and the practice of mindfulness is seen as a way to help the therapist be and to live what they teach.

Although the article is written from a marriage and family therapy perspective and the case example presented is that of a heterosexual couple, the concepts presented, especially the idea that spirituality of the therapist impacts the therapy process, seem to have a wide range of applicability.

Rivett and Street (2001) also write about spirituality from a marriage and family therapy perspective, and similar to Anderson and Worthen (1997), recognize that the therapist’s own beliefs and spirituality impact the therapy process. Rivett and Street maintain that there are instrumental connections and metaphysical connections between issues pertaining to spirituality and those pertaining to psychology. They explain that instrumental connections rely on the use of the client’s spiritual beliefs to inform therapy practice through being sensitive to spiritual diversity and the use of spiritual beliefs, themes, and practices. Metaphysical connections involve applying spiritual concepts to the therapy process and rely on the use of the therapist’s own beliefs about how therapy and spirituality are connected. Thus, the therapist’s awareness of personal spiritual beliefs
is vital. Rivett and Street state, "...[T]he act of therapy is itself part of the spiritual expression of the therapist and the clients" (p. 465). This statement reflects the view that therapy is a transformative and sacred process for both the therapist and the client.

A theme that continues in a final piece written from a marriage and family therapy perspective is the influence of the therapist's own spiritual perspective on the therapy process. Aponte (2002) suggests that therapists first must be aware of their own spirituality and then understand the worldview of the client. In this article, Aponte emphasizes a moral component to spirituality, which at times seems to reduce spiritual issues and struggles to matters of moral decision-making; however he recognizes the role that spirituality can play in healing and the connection between spirituality and relationships among people. Aponte comments on the therapist's use of self to help relate to the client's spirituality without imposing personal spiritual beliefs and values as an example of the therapist integrating spirituality into their professional role.

The authors of the previous eight articles or chapters have drawn on a conceptualization that is inclusive of eastern thought and embraces both theistic and non-theistic perspectives as a foundation for their discussions of spirituality as a process component in counseling. In the paragraphs that follow, four articles or chapters in which spirituality is conceptualized from primarily western and theistic perspectives, are presented. These conceptual pieces, which also pertain to spirituality as a process component in counseling, are critically reviewed and major contributions from each piece are identified.

In their theoretical piece, Benjamin and Looby (1998) identify spirituality as a component of wellness and discuss spirituality in the context of Maslow's and Rogers's
theories, connecting self-actualization, spirituality transformation, and optimal wellness. Benjamin and Looby offer several useful counseling implications of their theoretical perspective, including the need for the therapist to understand their own spirituality and that of the client, the potential for the client’s spirituality to positively impact the therapeutic process, and the role of spirituality in creating meaning and providing support and strength for the client.

Rogers and Maslow both agreed that the counseling relationship between counselor and client is the bond that nurtures and holistically heals a hurting client. The most powerful component, therefore, in counseling—one human being helping another—is the spiritual connection between counselor and client.

(Benjamin & Looby, 1998, p. 99)

This quote emphasizes the sacred nature of the therapeutic relationship and its role in healing, a concept that is of great consequence as other authors, including Anderson and Worthen (1997), Aponte (2002), Fukuyama and Sevig (1999), Jankowski (2002), Perlstein (2001), and West (1998), also describe relationships as spiritual.

Linnenberg (1997) writes another theoretical piece, in which spirituality and the counseling process is examined from a choice theory and reality therapy perspective. Of value is Linnenberg’s assertion that before being able to assist clients, the therapist must first be aware of self and the influence of one’s culture, worldview, historical context, background events and situations, and environment in shaping one’s perspective on spirituality.

Similar to Linnenberg, Richards and Bergin (2004), focus on theistic spiritual perspectives in presenting their spiritual strategy for psychotherapy. The authors present a
theoretical framework and suggest spiritual therapeutic interventions, cautioning that interventions be chosen and implemented within the framework of the client’s spiritual beliefs. Examples of spiritual therapeutic interventions include meditation, prayer, scripture study, spiritual imagery, and utilization of the client’s religious support network. Richards and Bergin offer process guidelines, including multicultural sensitivity and establishing an open and safe relationship.

In his article, Jankowski (2002) compares postmodern and resilient spirituality. While he initially presents a broad definition of spirituality that acknowledges connection with other people, nature, and/or a divine being, Jankowski seems to focus on one’s relationship with God throughout the rest of the article. He is critical of postmodern spirituality for its focus on subjective experience, its overemphasis on vertical spirituality, or an individual’s connection to the divine, and its neglect of horizontal spirituality, or an individual’s connection to others, resulting in disconnection among people. Jankowski advocates spiritual transformation in which the therapist helps a client to move from a postmodern spirituality to a resilient spirituality. Resilient spirituality is described as consisting of cognitive, metaphysical, and relational dimensions and involves “…clients finding meaning in religious doctrine, exercising faith as a way of knowing, and experiencing interpersonal connection with God and with others” (Jankowski, 2002, p. 77). Jankowski advocates for awareness within counselors of their own spiritual beliefs and how they relate to those of the client, and suggests the tentative use of the counselor’s own spirituality as a resource in counseling without forcing it on the client. Helping the client to establish connections with others is viewed as a goal, since a sense of connection with other people can promote resilient spirituality, healing,
Jankowski establishes a solid critique of postmodern spirituality and capitalizes on a strength-based perspective in promoting resilient spirituality.

The conceptual articles and chapters discussed in the preceding paragraphs constitute the majority of the literature on the use of spirituality as a process component in counseling. Due to the scarcity of literature and the diversity of ideas presented within each piece, identification of unifying themes across the literature proved difficult; however review of this literature does reveal some valuable concepts and ideas, which are identified in the paragraphs that follow.

Throughout the literature, spirituality was consistently presented as an integral component of the therapeutic relationship. As such, the spirituality of the therapist can be influential in how the therapeutic process is approached, making it vital for therapists to examine and be aware of their own personal spiritual perspective and worldview (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Jankowski, 2002; Linnenberg, 1997; West, 1998). Likewise, openness to multiple realities and awareness and understanding of the client’s spiritual perspective is also essential in the therapy process (Aponte, 2002; Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Cornett, 1998; Richards & Bergin, 2004; Rivett & Street, 2001).

The sacred nature of the therapy process and the therapeutic relationship is also presented in some of the literature. Before elaborating on this theme, the term sacred will be addressed. Pargament and Mahoney (2002) refer to sacred as being those things that are set apart as being worthy of reverence and respect. “The sacred includes concepts of God, the divine, and the transcendent. However, other objects can become sacred or take on extraordinary power by virtue of their association with, or representation of, divinity”
Thus sacred objects can include time and space, events, cultural products, people, psychological and social attributes, and roles. It follows from this description that the therapy process and the therapeutic relationship can also be regarded by therapist, client, or both as sacred. Benjamin & Looby (1998), Cornett (1998), Perlstein (2001), and West (1998) all describe therapy as a spiritual process, and Rivett and Street (2001) note that therapy can be part of both the therapist’s and the client’s spiritual expression and transformation. West equates the therapist’s attention to their own inner process while also attending to that of the client to spiritual practice, and Cornett describes the therapist as a companion or guide on a spiritual journey. Likewise, the spiritual connection between the counselor and client within the therapeutic relationship is seen as sacred and healing (Benjamin & Looby, 1998). Consistent with this perspective on the spiritual nature of the therapeutic relationship is the emphasis on connectedness with others and with the universe, with all relationships being considered spiritual (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Jankowski, 2002; Perlstein, 2001; Weiner, 2001).

Within the therapeutic relationship, focusing on being, rather than on doing or saying, so as to allow the client’s spiritual process to unfold, is emphasized (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Cornett, 1998; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Perlstein, 2001; West, 1998). Spirituality can also assist the therapist in being open to the client’s emotions and in holding the client’s pain (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Cornett, 1998; Perlstein, 2001). In this way, spirituality can be a source of support and strength for both the client and the therapist.

Finally, Perlstein (2001) and Weiner (2001) both discuss spirituality and the
counseling process from a feminist perspective, focusing on spirituality as a meaning making process and emphasizing the connectedness and relational nature of spirituality. This perspective also provides a context for better understanding the spirituality of the client, especially when working with women who may be experiencing a sense of spiritual disconnection due to the patriarchal nature of many traditional western religions (Weiner, 2001).

**Major Contributions from Research Literature**

While the number of conceptual articles on spirituality and counseling process is minimal, there is an even greater dearth of research articles. Indeed, review of the literature yielded only two research studies concerned with spirituality and the counseling process. In the paragraphs that follow, these two studies are critically reviewed and major contributions from each piece are identified.

Hickson, Housley, and Wages (2000) conducted a quantitative study in which they focused on the following research questions: “What are the attitudes and perceptions of LPC’s [Licensed Professional Counselors] concerning spirituality in the counseling process?...What influence does perceived importance of spirituality in one’s own counseling practice have on counselors’ perceptions of spirituality?” (p. 60). In their review of literature, the authors note the importance of spirituality, as well as the history of neglecting spiritual issues in the mental health field, which helps to establish the need for their study. The authors provide an operational definition of spirituality that is inclusive of multiple spiritual perspectives, both theistic and non-theistic, and they explain what the LPC credential means. In the study, a random sample of 300 LPCs in Georgia and Mississippi were sent surveys; however, only 147 usable responses were
returned. According to the demographic information presented, 90 respondents were female and 57 were male, with the majority of the respondents falling between the ages of 40 to 59. In describing their sample, the authors note in the discussion section that the majority of the participants were Caucasian, but specific details regarding demographic information are not provided.

In describing their survey instrument, the authors report that it contained demographic questions, 15 items related to counselor perceptions of spirituality and the counseling process which were in Likert format, and 10 items related to spiritual issues and gender and age of the client. Also included in the survey was an operational definition of spirituality, which helped to provide a unifying context for participants to refer to in responding to the items on the survey. The authors report that the survey was reviewed for face validity by three researchers with experience in the field of spirituality.

In describing their research design, the authors report that their study was descriptive and relied on frequency distributions and ANOVAs in analyzing the data. In summarizing their results, the authors report that the findings of the study indicate that the LPCs recognized the importance of awareness of personal spiritual beliefs in the counseling process and ascribed to the belief that spirituality is universal and can promote change within the counseling process. Findings also indicate that spirituality is not experienced differently by gender but is expressed differently. A limitation of this study seems to be lack of diversity with respect to geography, race, and age of participants.

The second research article is also a quantitative study. Cashwell, Young, Cashwell, and Belaire (2001) conducted an analogue study in which undergraduate counselors-in-training evaluated the effectiveness of counseling after viewing videotapes.
The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the level of spirituality of each participant and the type of counseling, whether spiritual or non-spiritual, on the perceptions of counselor effectiveness. The participants in the study consisted of 228 undergraduate students in counselor education and educational psychology classes. Demographic information on the participants included information on gender, age, race, religious affiliation, and level of religious activity. The sample seemed to lack diversity in terms of age, geography, and religious affiliation of participants, with the majority of participants being female, European American, Christian and reporting a high level of religious activity. High level of religious activity was explained to mean participation in organized religious activities at least once per week; however this conceptualization does not seem to be inclusive of spiritual but non-religious activities. An operational definition of spirituality was not provided, which would have been valuable in providing a framework or context for understanding the concept of spirituality as it is used in this study.

The instruments used in the study include: the Human Spirituality Scale (HSS), a 20 item scale that provides a global measure of spirituality, the Counselor Rating Form-Short Version (CRF-S), which can be used to assess counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ), in which the items composing the depth and smoothness subscales were utilized, a helpfulness measure, consisting of one item in Likert format assessing the perceived helpfulness of the counselor, and a request measure, consisting of one item in Likert format assessing the respondent’s preference to be seen by the counselor he/she is observing. Limited psychometric information is provided about the instrumentation used in the study. The
dependent variables in the study consist of the respondent’s perceptions of the counselor’s expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, which are measured by the CRF-S, and the perception of the depth and smoothness of the session, which is measured by the SEQ.

The independent variables in the study are the respondent’s spiritual orientation (high or low) and the style of counseling intervention (spiritual or non-spiritual). The respondent’s spiritual orientation was determined by administering the HSS to participants and then dividing them, based on the number of standard deviations above or below the mean, into two groups (high or low spiritual orientation) with 64 respondents in each group. It appears that the authors excluded from the remainder of the study the 100 participants whose scores fell closest to the mean. The authors used an analogue design in employing spiritual and non-spiritual interventions. The two videotaped analogue conditions both used the same counselor and client with the same presenting problem, but one analogue had a spiritual intervention, while the other intervention was non-spiritual. Excerpts from the scripts of each analogue were included; however neither type of intervention was explained in detail. Participants from the two groups (high and low spiritual orientation) were randomly assigned to view one of the two videotaped analogues, and they then completed the CRF-S, SEQ, and helpfulness and request measures. A 2x2x5 (client level of spirituality by spiritual or non-spiritual approach to counseling by dependent variables) MANOVA was used in analyzing the data. Findings indicate that the client’s level of spirituality did not mediate the perception of counselor effectiveness regardless of whether a spiritual or non-spiritual approach to counseling was used. A limitation of this study is that only one type of spiritual intervention was
examined. Furthermore, the use of analogues, because of their artificial nature, limits generalizability of results. Excerpts from each analogue script were provided, and these scripts reveal differences in length and affective content that may serve as confounding factors in the study.

Both studies reviewed in this section can provide a context for how research on spirituality and counseling has been conducted, relying primarily on analogues, surveys of counselors, and quantitative methodology. Hickson and colleagues (2000) found that the Licensed Professional Counselors in their study recognized the importance of awareness of personal spiritual beliefs in the counseling process and ascribed to the belief that spirituality is universal and can promote change within the counseling process. Cashwell and colleagues (2001) found that the client's level of spirituality did not mediate the perception of counselor effectiveness regardless of whether a spiritual or non-spiritual approach was used. These studies and their findings offer encouragement for continued research on spirituality and counseling. Neither study discussed in this section can be described as focusing directly on counseling process research in an actual clinical setting; thus research in this area is sorely needed.

Obviously, research specific to spirituality and the counseling process is quite limited. A broader search of literature pertaining to counseling and spirituality reveals a greater number of research articles in the area of content and working with specific populations or issues. Studies have been conducted examining client perspectives on spiritual issues in counseling sessions, with the focus being on content rather than process (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2001), and spirituality and childhood abuse (Ganje-Fling, Veach, Kuang, & Houg, 2000; Reinert & Smith, 1997; Ryan, 1998a; Weber &
Cummings, 2003). Conceptual literature has been written focused on spirituality and African American women (Frame, Williams, & Green, 1999), spiritual content in family therapy (Griffith & Rotter, 1999; Helmeke & Bischof, 2002) and social work practice (Gotterer, 2001), spiritual content in group therapy (Jacques, 1998), spirituality and childhood abuse (Ganje-Fling, & McCarthy, 1996; Lemoncelli & Carey, 1996; Ryan, 1998b), spirituality and terminal illness (Johnson, 2003), and spirituality and substance abuse (Priester, 2000). Although reviewing this literature is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is useful to be aware of the scholarly work being done in the area of spirituality and counseling. These examples are by no means exhaustive, but they do provide insight into the state of the literature and can provide a context for recommendations for future scholarship.

Based on the review of conceptual and research literature pertaining to the use of spirituality as a process component in counseling, it is evident that further scholarship on this topic is needed. Unifying themes across the literature are lacking; however spirituality seems to be consistently presented as an integral component of the therapeutic relationship. Likewise, all of the articles and chapters reviewed encourage continued exploration of spirituality and counseling. This provides a foundation for establishing the need for further scholarship on the use of spirituality as a process component in counseling.

Recommendations for Additional Scholarship

In this section, recommendations are made concerning areas in need of additional scholarship. Worthington and Sandage (2002), in describing the state of the research on spirituality and psychotherapy, comment that the majority of the studies examine either
the general area of religious and spiritual values in therapy or religious-accommodative psychotherapy approaches. Evident in this literature review is the scarcity of research on spirituality as a process component in counseling. The two research studies that were found pertaining to this area are both quantitative in nature, and although research in general is needed, it would provide a richer perspective if some of this additional research utilized qualitative methodologies.

Research utilizing actual clients and therapists in a clinical setting, rather than relying on analogues, as well as drawing on participants from diverse spiritual orientations and ethnic backgrounds is recommended (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Cashwell, et al., 2001; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). The literature would also be enriched with further examination of the use of spiritual interventions with clients with various presenting problems and its impact on the therapeutic process. For example, Perlstein’s (2001) article in which she presents examples of her use of ritual in therapy can serve as a foundation for studying ritual as a spiritual intervention and its impact on the therapy process through the use of qualitative methodology. Worthen and Anderson (1997) encourage research on the client’s perspective of spirituality and the counseling process, specifically exploring how the client’s spiritual belief system and conceptualization of the transcendent influence the counseling process.

Studying the therapist’s perspective on spirituality and the counseling process is specifically encouraged by Hickson and colleagues (2000). Several authors commented on the spiritual or sacred nature of the therapeutic relationship and therapy process (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Cornett, 1998; Perlstein, 2001; Rivett & Street, 2001; West, 1998). A qualitative study in which therapists are asked to share their thoughts about and
experiences with the sacred and spiritual aspects of the therapeutic relationship and process would contribute to the literature and provide support for therapeutic approaches and perspectives, including feminist therapy and the interpersonal process approach, that emphasize the sacredness of relationship between the therapist and client. In studying the therapist’s perspective on spirituality and counseling process, a feminist perspective, similar to that of Weiner (2001) in her conceptual paper on spirituality in the therapy process, can be useful in critiquing existing scholarship pertaining to spirituality and counseling process, and in providing a context for research and choice of methodology. Thus, studying how women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process, how the spirituality of these women appear in the work that they do as therapists, and how spirituality contributes to the counseling process is supported by this review of literature related to counseling process and spirituality.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate therapists’ experiences of spirituality as a component of the counseling process. Currently, there is minimal literature pertaining to this topic and it is primarily conceptual in nature. Of the literature reviewed, only two research articles on spirituality as a component of the counseling process were found, and both articles were quantitative studies. Thus, there is considerable need for further investigation of this topic, particularly from a qualitative perspective.

Research Questions

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

How do women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process?

How does the spirituality of these women appear in the work that they do as therapists?

How does spirituality contribute to the counseling process?

Feminist Methodology, Qualitative Research, and Phenomenology

This study employed feminist methodology, qualitative research and phenomenology. According to Harding (1987), feminist methodology refers to how feminist researchers think about method. This perspective challenges the tendency to universalize the experiences of men and instead values women as agents of knowledge (DeVault, 1999; Harding, 1987). Although feminist researchers utilize a wide range of approaches and methods, there are three distinct features of feminist methodology identified by Harding that are core to my understanding of feminist methodology. The first feature is that feminist methodologies focus on women’s experiences, with women
revealing their own experiences. The second feature is that the purpose of the research is for women, providing women with explanations they need and desire. The third feature is that "...the inquirer herself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter...the class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint" (Harding, 1987, p. 9). Thus, as a researcher, I do not set as an ideal complete objectivity, but instead strive to be aware of my own experience and perspective of spirituality and the counseling process, as well as the various dimensions of my identity and experiences that shape my worldview, and how these impact my research process. DeVault adds that feminist methodologists view themselves as a resource rather than contaminant and are visible in the product of their research, seek methods that do not deny subjectivity, and welcome multiple perspectives.

According to DeVault (1999), a hallmark of feminist methodology is that it support research toward social justice, leading to social action or change to benefit women. As the focus of this study is on women therapists' experiences of spirituality in the counseling process, both therapists and clients, through the therapeutic relationship, stand to benefit from this research. Initially, I understood that my study could impact on a smaller scale individual therapists and their relationships with clients in the counseling process; however, I questioned how my study could promote social justice, as this seemed to be a much loftier, far-reaching goal for such a deeply personal topic that spirituality can be. It was in reading the work of Carol Christ (1980) that I came to understand the connection between my research and social justice. Christ states, "Women's spiritual quest provides orientation for women's social quest and grounds it in
something larger than individual or even collective achievements” (p. 11). Women’s spirituality provides a foundation for the social quest of working towards social justice and ending oppression of women and serves as a source of unity and support in such work. Learning more about how women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process, how the spirituality of these women appears in the work that they do as therapists, and how they view spirituality as contributing to the counseling process can lead to change not only in the work of individual therapists, but, through attention to spirituality within the counseling process, it can serve as a foundation for promoting larger social change.

A feminist perspective on research does not dictate specific research procedures, as dictation of particular research procedures would be antithetical to a feminist perspective in which the procedures should emerge from the researcher and topic; however, feminism informs all aspects of this study. As a feminist myself, this philosophical perspective on research corresponds with my perspective on the creation of knowledge and has shaped all aspects of this research from the selection of the topic, to the choice of research methods, and to the manner in which data will be analyzed and shared.

Qualitative research is defined by Creswell (1998) as “...an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Qualitative research is of particular value in investigating complex topics within their context and in understanding the perspectives of the
participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This is especially relevant for investigating the complex topic of spirituality from the perspective of women therapists, which is the aim of this study. Spirituality has been described as a personal meaning-making process (Aponte, 2002; Weiner, 2001), and it seems appropriate to study such a topic using a qualitative approach, given that qualitative researchers focus on how individuals make sense of their lives and attribute meaning to the phenomena that occur in them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Creswell (1998) provides a rationale for choosing a qualitative research approach. He comments that the nature of the research question is focused on asking how or what in order to describe particular phenomena. In this study, the research question asks how the therapist experiences spirituality in the counseling process and how spirituality contributes to the counseling process, making a qualitative approach appropriate. Creswell also states that a qualitative approach is appropriate when the topic being researched is one in need of exploration, which makes a qualitative approach particularly relevant for this study given the dearth of scholarly literature in the area of spirituality and counseling process. A qualitative approach is also appropriate when the desired goal is to provide a detailed description of phenomena in a manner that acknowledges the connection between the researcher and the topic being studied and emphasizes the role of the researcher as a learner who honors the stories and perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Spirituality is a topic of great importance in my life and one to which I am deeply connected, both on a personal level and through the research I have conducted. Likewise, spirituality is deeply personal, so utilizing a qualitative approach allows me to describe the phenomena of spirituality in the
counseling process in a manner that is true to the perspectives of the participants in this study while also acknowledging my own relationship with the topic. From a feminist methodological perspective, this is consistent with locating the researcher in the same plane as the subject matter and focusing on women, rather than universalizing the experiences of men, to give voice to the experiences of women.

Among the various traditions of qualitative inquiry, phenomenology is the specific approach that is used in this study. Polkinghorne (1989) states, “The aim of phenomenologically informed research is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience” (p. 44). Emphasis is placed on understanding the essence of an experience through the participants’ descriptions of the meaning of their experience (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989). Thus, phenomenology is an appropriate approach to use in understanding the essence of how therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process and how they view spirituality as contributing to the counseling process.

In conducting phenomenological research, researchers are expected to develop plans specific to exploring the phenomenon that is the focus of their study (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989). Polkinghorne (1989) identifies a general format for phenomenological research that consists of gathering descriptions from people who have had the experience under investigation, analyzing the descriptions in a manner that allows the researcher to grasp the common elements of the experience, and creating a research report that gives an accurate and clear description of the experience. In the sections that follow, the plans specific to this study for participant selection and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis are discussed.
Participant Recruitment and Selection

In selecting participants, "Subjects are chosen who are able to function as informants by providing rich descriptions of the experience being investigated" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 47). As Colaizzi (1978) emphasizes, "Experience with the investigated topic and articulateness suffice as criteria for selecting subjects" (p. 58). In investigating how women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process, the best informants are women therapists themselves. For this study, women therapists in a variety of mental health professions, such as psychologists, counselors, and social workers, in the Midwest region of the United States whose primary work is providing ongoing individual therapy were recruited. Potential participants were women therapists who experience spirituality as important in therapy and attend to the spiritual dimension of counseling. Although spirituality can be expressed in religious practices, this study is focused on how spirituality contributes to the counseling process rather than on religious beliefs or practices. Potential participants spent a significant portion of their working hours providing therapy, at least 7-8 individual client contact hours per week, and had been working as therapists for at least three to five years or more. Recruitment of participants was conducted in two ways. First, mental health professionals who have an interest in spirituality and a spiritual perspective in their work were identified. These professionals were people known to me. Once identified, these professionals were asked to nominate themselves, if interested, and other women therapists who integrate spirituality into their work as therapists, as prospective participants. Second, interested individuals were given the opportunity to self-select through listservs or online newsletters. In deciding which listservs and newsletters to use, consideration was given to
those organizations whose members were likely to have an interest in spirituality,
diversity issues, counseling process, and/or counseling practice research. Permission was obtained to post an invitation to participate in this study on listservs for the Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues in Counseling (AGLBIC), the American College Counseling Association (ACCA), the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD), the listserv for counselor educators called CESNET, and the listserv for counseling center training directors called ACCTA. Permission was also obtained to post an invitation to participate in this study on the listserv for the leadership of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) as well as in the ASERVIC online newsletter. Individuals who were interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher by phone or email to receive further information. Interested individuals were sent a cover letter and consent document in which the topic of the study and its potential contribution to scholarship in the area of spirituality and therapy was further described, along with a description of what participation in the study would entail, information regarding confidentiality, and the risks and benefits of participation.

The number of participants selected for phenomenological studies varies (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989); however Creswell (1998) suggests conducting in-depth interviews with up to 10 participants. In selecting participants, Polkinghorne (1989) emphasizes the importance of choosing “…an array of individuals who provide a variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored” (p. 48). To assist in selecting participants who can provide “…richly varied descriptions…” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 48) of their experiences of spirituality in the counseling process,
interested individuals were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire was based on Arredondo and colleagues' (1996) Personal Dimensions of Identity (PDI) model, which serves to provide a holistic perspective from which to understand the various aspects of an individual's identity that impact her or his worldview. Individuals were asked to provide information on their gender, age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious or spiritual affiliation, geographic location, highest degree earned, field of study, work setting, population with whom they work, theoretical orientation, and estimates of number of hours per week spent in various work-related activities including: individual therapy, group therapy, assessment, case management, and outreach. Participants were also asked to briefly share their current personal definition of spirituality. Consistent with the goal of selecting 8 to 10 participants, 9 women from a variety of backgrounds were selected to participate in the study based on this information from the demographics questionnaire. I aimed to select participants varying in the dimensions of race and cultural background, sexual orientation, and age, as spirituality is an example of a dimension of identity that could be expected to differ across these dimensions or could transcend these dimensions.

Summary of Participants' Demographic Information

In order to protect anonymity, demographic information of the nine participants is given in summary form (see Table 1). All participants currently reside in the Midwest region of the United States. Eight women are United States citizens, and one woman is a Canadian citizen but has lived in the United States for 20 years. Participants range in age from 33 to 63, with one woman in her 30's, three in their 40's, four in their 50's, and one woman in her 60's. Seven women identified as heterosexual and two women identified
as lesbian. One woman identified as African American, one woman identified as African
American and Native American, and seven women identified as Caucasian. Six women
identified as upper middle class, one as middle class, one as lower middle class, and one
woman identified as lower middle class when growing up and currently as middle class.
Two women identified as single, one woman as partnered, and five women as married.
One woman identified as having aphonic aphasia, and eight women did not identify as
having a disability. The women ranged in years of experience as therapists from 9½ to
35 years. One woman has a Master’s degree in Urban Mental Health, three women have
Master’s degrees in social work, one woman has a doctorate in Counselor Education, and
four women have doctorates in Counseling Psychology. Three women work in both
university counseling centers and private practice, with one of these women sharing that
she has worked at substance abuse treatment facilities in the past. Three women work in
private practice, with one of the woman sharing past experience working in a university
counseling center setting. Three women work in university counseling centers, with one
woman sharing that she has also worked with populations affected by domestic violence,
HIV, substance abuse, infant mental health issues, developmental delays from birth to
three years old, parenting crises, crisis intervention, and emergency room social work.

Table 1

Frequency Data for Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

50
### Table 1—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Sexual Orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American &amp; Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree, Urban Mental Health</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree, Social Work</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate, Counselor Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate, Counseling Psychology</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Work context**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private practice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University counseling center</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University counseling center &amp; private practice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to provide context for the results of this study, information about the participants’ religious/spiritual affiliations of their families of origin, as well as their current religious/spiritual affiliations will be shared individually (see Table 2). Ann grew...
up in the Episcopal church and attended Catholic grade school and high school. She currently belongs to the same Episcopal church as she did growing up. Carmen’s father belonged to the Missouri Synod Lutheran church and her mother was Methodist. Carmen shared that she was raised in the Congregational church. Carmen reports that she converted to Roman Catholicism and then joined the Unitarian Church. She states that she currently, and for the past 30 years, has not ascribed to an organized religion. She states that she has a personal spirituality based in stewardship of the land and love of nature as well as life experiences and study, which includes religions, psychology, philosophy, music, art, history, languages, astrophysics, etc. China grew up in the Lutheran church and currently belongs to the Lutheran church. Elfy’s family of origin belonged to the Calvinistic Christian Reformed church. Elfy’s current religious/spiritual affiliation is Unitarian Universalist and earth-based spirituality. Ellen grew up in the Methodist church. She currently is atheist and attends Unitarian Universalist church. Erin was raised in the Jewish religion and culture. She also currently identifies as Jewish. Frances reports being involved in/infiltrated by many organized religious groups during her upbringing, including Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness, Seventh Day Adventist, Methodist, etc. She is now drawn to Buddhism and hopes to integrate this more fully into her nature. Rebecca’s family of origin was Methodist. She states that she still belongs to the Methodist church, but does not attend church expect on major days with her mother who is Presbyterian. Samantha Ann’s family of origin identified as Disciple of Christ, and she currently maintains this affiliation.
### Table 2

**Religious and/or Spiritual Affiliation of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious/Spiritual Upbringing</th>
<th>Current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal; attended Catholic schools</td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregational; Roman Catholicism;</td>
<td>Personal spirituality based in stewardship of the land, love of nature, life experiences and study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian</td>
<td>Unitarian Universalist and earth-based spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Lutheran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvinistic Christian Reformed</td>
<td>Methodist; attends Unitarian Universalist church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced by many religious groups including: Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness, Seventh Day Adventist, Methodist</td>
<td>In process of integrating Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Personal spirituality; belongs to Methodist church but does not regularly attend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciple of Christ</td>
<td>Disciple of Christ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data is typically collected through interviews with participants when conducting phenomenological research (Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989). In this study, two
interviews, an initial and a follow-up interview, were conducted with participants. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests the use of open-ended interviews that allow enough time to explore the topic in-depth with an amount of self-reflection comfortable for the participant and appropriate to the topic. Both the initial and follow-up interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended, with each interview lasting between 1 ½ to 2 hours. Prior to initial interviews, participants were sent information about the general topic areas of the questions in order to have time to reflect on these areas in preparation for the interviews. Initial interviews were conducted in person and included the opportunity for each participant to give voice to her personal definition and conceptualization of spirituality, her experience of spirituality in the counseling process, the ways in which her spirituality appears in the work that she does as a therapist, her view of how spirituality contributes to the counseling process, and her experience of how the interaction or relationship between the client and the therapist informs how spirituality is present in the counseling process. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used. Follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone. In preparation for follow-up interviews, I reflected on the data already obtained and formulated additional questions to allow a deeper understanding of the topic being explored. I then incorporated these questions into the follow-up interviews. Prior to the follow-up interviews, each participant was sent, by email or by US mail depending on participant preference, her individual narrative and the collective story that was based on all initial interviews. Each participant was asked to reflect on these items in preparation for the follow-up interview and to share feedback during the interview, particularly regarding whether she felt that her individual narrative accurately gave voice to her own story and whether the collective
story was inclusive of her experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Eight out of the nine original participants participated in the follow-up interviews. The ninth participant was contacted and was sent her individual narrative and the collective story, but did not respond to the request to schedule a follow-up interview. Each initial face-to-face interview and each follow-up telephone interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher or transcriptionist.

In phenomenological research, the interview "...involves an interpersonal engagement in which subjects are encouraged to share with a researcher the details of their experience" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 49). To this end, it is vital that the researcher remain open to new elements in the descriptions of the phenomenon and not formulate questions to test predetermined hypotheses and that the interview focus on specific situations and descriptions of experiences of the phenomenon so as to allow its essence to emerge (Polkinghorne, 1989). Thus, it is important that the researcher examine personal experiences and prejudgments in order to be open to discovering the essence of a phenomenon based upon what the experience means to the participants (Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989). This process of self-reflection is consistent with the emphases on utilizing the experiences of the researcher as a starting point for inquiry, locating the researcher within the plane of the research, and being open to subjectivity that are present in feminist methodology (DeVault, 1999; Harding, 1987).

I have engaged in self-reflection and documented my thoughts about the research topic and personal sense of meaning created from my experiences of spirituality and the counseling process in chapter one. As part of this self-reflection process, I have also examined my presuppositions and biases in order to help avoid imposing them on the
perspectives of the participants when conducting interviews and analyzing data (Polkinghorne, 1989). My biases and assumptions are explicitly listed below.

1. Spirituality is a component of the counseling process.
2. Spirituality does impact the therapeutic relationship.
3. The spirituality of the therapist appears in the therapist’s clinical work.
4. Spirituality can be empowering and a source of support for both the therapist and the client.
5. Spirituality can be viewed in an inclusive way, embracing a variety of beliefs, practices, perspectives, and worldviews.
6. The counseling process can be transformative for both the client and the therapist, and this transformative power is spiritual in nature.
7. There is value in learning about women’s experiences of spirituality, which have often been silenced throughout history, and giving voice to the experiences of women therapists is important in contributing to our knowledge about spirituality and the counseling process.
8. Learning about women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process can lead to change in the work of individual therapists and can serve as a foundation for promoting larger social change.

Data Analysis Procedures

After obtaining data from the interviews, phenomenological methods informed the analysis of the data. Giorgi (1985) lists general steps to data analysis from a phenomenological perspective, which include: reading the interview text in order to get a sense of the whole, discriminating units of meaning from a psychological perspective and
with an emphasis on the phenomenon being explored, transforming the meaning units from the language of the participants to language that emphasizes the psychological insight contained in each description and creates general categories, and finally integrating the transformed units of meaning into a consistent description of the phenomenon being explored. These general steps provide an overview of the data analysis process. Colaizzi (1978) describes procedures for data analysis that go beyond Giorgi’s general steps and offer greater depth and explanation. Colaizzi’s procedures were utilized in analyzing data in this study and are summarized in the paragraphs that follow.

Colaizzi’s (1978) first step in data analysis is to read the transcripts, or each participants’ descriptions of the phenomenon being explored, in order to get a sense of them. Then the researcher returns to each individual transcript and extracts phrases or sentences, also called significant statements, that relate directly to the phenomenon being explored. The third step is to formulate the meanings of each significant statement extracted in the second step. Giorgi’s (1985) description of transforming the meaning units from the language of the participants to language that emphasizes the psychological insight contained in each description to create general categories is useful in conceptualizing this step. Colaizzi cautions that the meanings formulated, although moving beyond what is said in the transcript, should never lose their connection to the original data. Correspondingly, Giorgi (1985) emphasizes that the meaning units that are formulated are “context-laden” and should not be considered independent of their context. My understanding of the psychological insight in each participant’s description is recorded in the form of written narratives for each participant. The fourth step is to
repeat step three for each transcript and to organize all of the formulated meanings in clusters of themes, attempting “…to allow for the emergence of themes which are common to all of the subjects’ protocols [or transcripts]” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). In this step, clusters of themes are validated by returning to the original transcripts and examining whether there are elements of the data that are neglected in the clusters of themes and whether the clusters of themes suggest anything that is not contained in the original transcripts. Colaizzi reminds the researcher that discrepancies among clusters of themes need to be tolerated and that data that does not correspond with themes or that is contradictory should not be ignored. In the fifth step, the results from all prior steps are integrated into an “…exhaustive description of the investigated topic” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 61). This exhaustive description, or collective story, should include, at least implicitly, all of the meanings that have been formulated (Giorgi, 1985). Thus, the individual perspectives of the participants are brought together and used to begin to develop a collective description. In step six, “An effort is made to formulate the exhaustive description of the investigated phenomenon in as unequivocal a statement of identification of its fundamental structure as possible” (p. 61). The product of this sixth step is a narrative summary of the essence of the phenomenon being explored. The seventh and final step is to return to each participant with the collective story in order to validate the findings. This is done through follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews were also used to gather additional information based on the participants’ thoughts and feedback about the collective story. The follow-up interviews provided an opportunity to ask any additional questions, generated after reflecting on the data obtained from the original interviews, in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the topic being
explored. New data from this step was then analyzed using the earlier steps and included in the final research product.

Throughout the data analysis process, self-reflection continues to be important. The researcher’s perspective impacts the process of formulating meanings (Giorgi, 1985), so it is vital that the researcher continue to engage in self-reflection. This was accomplished by maintaining a journal throughout the data analysis process, using self-reflection as I made decisions about themes to highlight within the data. Likewise, I reflected on my story written in chapter one, the collective story, and my journal, looking for any undue influence before I returned to the participants with the collective story for their feedback.

Auditing was a key aspect of addressing the rigor of this study and was integrated into the data analysis process. During data analysis, my doctoral chairperson was involved in reading interview transcripts, participants’ individual stories, and the collective story. Specifically, she read the individual stories and tracked how well they represented the transcripts. Likewise, when reading the collective story, she audited whether it represented all the individual stories. She offered feedback, asked thought-provoking questions, and helped me to process my thoughts and reactions as data analysis progressed. This served as an auditing function throughout data analysis.

After integrating data from the follow-up interviews, I then consulted with an external auditor. In selecting an individual to serve as an auditor, I wanted to choose a woman who feels grounded in herself as a qualitative researcher or as a therapist or both. The auditor who was selected has over 10 years of experience as a therapist, has an interest in spirituality and therapy, and is also interested in qualitative research. The role
of the auditor is to examine the research process and data generated through the interview and analysis processes and offer feedback on whether the findings obtained in the interviews and data analysis steps support the reported findings (Creswell, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After reviewing the data and analysis process, the auditor and I met to discuss her feedback. She asked questions regarding a theme that emerged in the coded data but did not appear to be included in the results. We discussed how it was included using different language in the final presentation of themes and the collective story. I received feedback from the auditor that the reported results of this study were indeed supported by the data from the interviews and analysis processes.

Rigor of the Study

In this section, strategies used to ensure the rigor, or trustworthiness, of the study are discussed. Creswell (1998) uses the term “verification” rather than “validity” in his discussion of rigor in order to emphasize qualitative research as an approach to inquiry distinct from quantitative research. This concept is also addressed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who offer specific approaches for establishing and evaluating the rigor of qualitative research that parallel the quantitative concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. These qualitative concepts are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

In this study, the probability of credible findings was increased through prolonged engagement, which entails spending sufficient time with each participant (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This was accomplished by allowing sufficient interview time in both the initial and follow-up interviews. Member checks were also used to increase credibility. This involved returning to the participants in order to obtain their perspectives on the
accuracy and credibility of the data, analyses, and interpretations (Creswell, 1998). The follow-up interviews served as an opportunity to engage in member checking. The participants reviewed their individual stories and the collective story and were asked during the follow-up interviews for feedback on the stories. Two participants made suggestions for minor revisions to their individual stories. All of the participants who engaged in follow-up interviews stated that the collective story resonated with them and felt inclusive of them.

The transferability of the findings can be increased by providing detailed descriptions of the participants in the results so that the reader can use that information to help make decisions about the transferability of the findings to other situations (Creswell, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the demographic questionnaire and the description of the participants, their work setting, and background contextual information aids in assessing transferability. Likewise providing thick description, including the use of extended quotes and making clear to the reader the connection between what the participant said and my understanding of it, are additional ways in which the transferability of findings to other settings and situations are addressed.

Dependability can be addressed by asking the question “Can I depend upon this (the research process as well as the findings)?” (Merrick, 1999, p. 28). According to Merrick, this includes asking questions about what types of methods were used in data collection and analysis, who participated in the study, who conducted the research and how the researcher influenced the task, so as to gain better insight into the trustworthiness of the research process and findings. To this end, an external auditor examined the process and the product of the research, evaluating whether the data support the findings.
of the study (Creswell, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Use of the external auditor also aids in increasing the confirmability of the findings. The concept of confirmability refers to whether the findings are coherent and supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness also encompasses efforts to make known, and thereby reduce, sources of bias by the researcher, promoting an awareness of “self-as-researcher” (Merrick, 1999). To this end, researcher bias was examined at the beginning and throughout the course of the study through self-reflection and journaling. In this process, “…the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Likewise, self-reflection and journaling allowed the researcher to give voice to the personal experience of doing the research and the internal processes that shaped the formulations of meanings and interpretations.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This chapter presents the essence of women therapists' experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. The essence is established by identifying common themes across the women's stories. Themes emerged as common if they were central to the women's stories. Most common themes were spontaneously offered, and the women who did not originally offer these themes all had something to contribute when asked in follow-up discussions. Quotations and examples are presented to illustrate these common themes. Although the common themes appeared in many participants' stories, the quotations and examples chosen are not exhaustive and instead are those that seem to best convey the theme being presented. The essence is further described in the collective story, which follows this discussion of individual themes.

In the sections that follow, the essence of the women therapists' experiences of spirituality in the counseling process will be presented. I offer these ideas as distinct; however they all overlap into a whole, mirroring the complexity and interconnection that seems to be part of discussing spirituality. Before focusing on the common themes, the women therapists' spiritual journeys are first described. Then the themes are shared. These themes include experiencing spirituality in the counseling process through personal spiritual growth and experiences in therapy impacting each other, through spirituality and diversity, and various dimensions of identity, particularly as women, therapists, and spiritual people, being interconnected and integrated, through experiencing spirituality as ever present in the counseling process, through experiencing spirituality within the counseling process as something larger than themselves, and through spirituality being a
resource in holding the client’s pain, as well as in self-care. Experiencing spirituality as connection is another common theme. The women identify safety, acceptance, non-judgment, compassion, and being heard and understood as elements contributing to connection within the therapy relationship. The theme of connection is particularly powerful in that it serves as a foundation for the counseling process, allowing greater depth in the relationship and leading to healing. Experiencing spirituality within the counseling process as trust is another common theme, along with experiencing spirituality in being present for the client, in joining with and honoring the client’s way of being in the world, and in tending to the whole person. Power and empowerment, creativity, making meaning, strength, and hope are also common themes presented in the following sections.

Description of the Women Therapists’ Spiritual Journeys

Before delving into the common themes, I would first like to describe the women therapists, specifically highlighting the essence of their spiritual journeys. The women, whether coming from an upbringing within a religious tradition or from a background in which spirituality was not a central focus within family of origin, all engaged in a personal spiritual journey which included exploring their own beliefs. For some, this journey was in existence since they first could remember. For others, this journey has been a more recent development. This spiritual journey and exploration included examining different religions and belief systems outside of religion, being curious and asking questions about one’s sense of self and purpose in life, and making intentional and conscious decisions to cultivate a personal sense of spirituality.
Ann shared her experience of exploring her own beliefs and making sense of them for herself. She spoke about reading and learning about different religions and belief systems and cultivating a personal sense of understanding. She highlighted the importance she learned of believing, not because she was told to, but because she had engaged in a process of searching and experiencing and had taken her beliefs on as her own. Likewise, Carmen also explored her beliefs, which led her to challenge patriarchal religious teachings and traditions. She shared that through her journey, she has come to believe that people are here for a reason, that life has purpose, and that we are all in a process of lifelong growth. She states that these beliefs are necessary for her as a foundation for being able to do her job as a therapist. Frances's spiritual journey included exposure to various religious and spiritual traditions and beliefs throughout her life. In speaking of her spiritual journey, Frances shared that she had been exposed to many different religions in childhood. She highlighted being embraced by a woman's community, identifying with feminist and womanist oriented perspectives, as feeling spiritual, as well as being drawn to the sense of interconnection and groundedness in the present moment that came with her exposure to Buddhism. In describing her spiritual journey, Erin spoke of finding a sense of self, as well as a power outside of herself. She emphasized her belief that spirituality is about connection rather than a rigid, dogmatic belief system. Rebecca's spiritual journey included cultivating her own sense of spirituality by making a decision to devote her energy towards embracing those aspects that were spiritually nourishing for her. Each of these examples were chosen to illustrate the women's process of exploring their own beliefs and learning about themselves as spiritual people as part of their spiritual journeys. Having described the women's
experiences of cultivating their own sense of spirituality and tending to their own
spiritual belief systems and journeys of spiritual growth, the common themes pertaining
to the women’s experiences of spirituality in the counseling process will now be shared.

Impact of Personal Spiritual Growth and Experiences in Therapy

The spirituality of the women appears in the work they do as therapists. The
women spoke about their personal spiritual growth and experiences in therapy impacting
each other. Elfy commented “...as my own sense of spirituality has grown, so too has it
grown within my...practice.” Erin shared her ability to connect her own spiritual
development, including navigating a Jewish-Christian marriage and motherhood, with her
growth as a therapist. “I think that myself growing spiritually outside of the session... has
created a completely different therapist...I think for me, my life events have changed me
to have definitely an increased understanding of where my clients are...” Likewise,
Rebecca commented on the role learning to do therapy plays in opening to self-reflection
and exploration, “…I do think part of learning to do therapy is learning to deal with really
awful stuff, and it’s learning to deal with really awful stuff that others do, but it’s
also...forces you to open to your own experience. I mean, one of the ironies of
psychology graduate school is you get in for your brain, but you get out because of your
heart...you’ve got to examine yourself, and you’ve got to examine yourself in ways,
often, you were choosing not to by using your brain. So it’s...a challenge to be a whole
person as you do your therapy, and then that challenges your own belief system.”

In a similar vein, the women also spoke about learning and growing from their
clients and experiences in the therapy relationship. Samantha Ann stated, “It’s not just
what’s going on for them, but we’re both being impacted by it. And being able to
recognize that, you know, without losing my boundaries as a therapist, but really acknowledging that what goes on in the relationship is going to have as much of an impact on me as it is on them; it just might have different meaning for me.” Ann shared a specific example of a powerful experience of learning from a client. “I had a woman that said she couldn’t do this and couldn’t do that, and, uh, because of her spiritual beliefs, and so I didn’t even bother to ask her what religion she was or how she was, you know, I just assumed I knew the religion because of this area and how it sounded, so my bias. But later on, um, she just hap-, and, and she was the same religion as me...It came out, but, um, I, I would have never guessed it, and so what I learned is that, um, you know, people c-, could almost come from the same household or same religious sect or, you know, and, and see spirituality totally different....I see religion and spirituality as something that’s open and uplifting and, and it gives you a way to live, and she saw it the opposite, as restricting and rigid and, and kept you confined...so that’s one thing about faith I’ve learned, or, or spirituality, to try to understand how that person is, even though... you may understand their doctrine; you may not understand how they’re living it out.”

Integrated and Interconnected Identities

The women in this study experienced their identities as women, spiritual people and therapists as interconnected and integrated. The women described their identities as being intertwined and blended together, difficult to separate out and core to how they view their work as therapists. China commented, “it feels like [all] those pieces are in there, and certain moments bring one of them more to the forefront, but that each kind of informs the other. Like, I don’t come in and I’m a therapist and I’m not a woman or I’m not spiritual.” Similarly, Rebecca stated, “I certainly see myself as a feminist
psychologist, and the, the feminist beliefs are core to how I view what I do as therapy. They're kind of intertwined with my spirituality as I've described it, and my humanism, humanistic sort of, and these are all kind of blended together…”

Carmen also highlighted the interconnection of her identities as woman, therapist, and spiritual person, stating “and so [gasps] we say how do they connect. They just do… If I did not allow it to come out, I would be, I would be closing off a big piece of who I am from the counseling experience, just as if I would say, ‘okay, I will not show any emotion,’ or ‘I will not think,’ you know, or ‘I will not be physically present.’”

Elfy spoke about spirituality naturally connecting with other aspects of her life. “…Whatever it is that I do on a daily basis to connect with, you know, a, a power that’s greater than myself, just naturally just sort of ebbs and flows into…whatever else it is that I do, so I feel like the more that I practice on a daily basis who I am as a spiritual person, it can’t help but sort of seep into everything else that I do.” Ellen also spoke about her spirituality being integrated into other dimensions of her identity. “Maybe what’s so hard for me to do…why it’s so hard for me to talk about is because it’s so integrated into everything else, you know, that it’s hard for me to, to separate it out… so I think it shows up in my work because it’s a part of who I am, and as with the other dimensions of human experience, I [am] taking a holistic approach to things, that’s a really important part to understand, however big or small a role it plays for a person, so I may not, you know, it may not be that the person will pursue that a lot or talk about it a lot, but I think there’s an awareness of that dimension being there and being pretty integrated into all the other aspects.”
For some women, the integration of their many identities is particularly powerful. In discussing the connection between her identities as a lesbian, woman, therapist and spiritual person, Rebecca shared her experience of reclaiming her sense of spirituality. She shared having a family background of fundamentalist Christianity and needing to "throw out" her religion in order to begin to grapple with her sexual orientation. It was at a conference on feminist therapy that her multiple identities came together. "It was the first time that my lesbian identity and my professional identity came to place, in the same place. And I went up into the mountains...to meditate, or just to walk, I guess, and I ended up kind of sitting on a rock and then had this total realization that we are all connected, and we're all connected in one big network...So my religious belief system was right there with it too. Three parts of me that I felt had been totally alienated and could not be connected were all of a sudden connected, and so that part of reclaiming a spiritual base, but reclaiming it with a different language."

Ann spoke about her identities as interconnected, with spirituality playing a central role in who she is, as well as in who other African-American women are. "I see myself as a spiritual person, I see myself as a woman, I see myself as African-American, I see myself, you know, maybe as a leader, and so I don’t know which came first...I probably focus on race a lot based on that’s where I see a lot of my injustices or, or, or my life encounters, and, you know, rarely a lot of oppression based on my religion or based on my sex, sometimes but not a lot...and if it is one of those...do they see me as a woman, or do they see me as a black woman? So...it’s hard to separate that out..." Ann went on to describe a study she conducted in which women of color frequently mentioned spirituality. She stated that spirituality is "...a part of their being, so if you’re doing
therapy with a client like that and you don’t mention spirituality, then you’ve missed a major part of who they are and what they’re about... and a lot of times I know with black women I’ll ask where’s your strength base, and, and that just leads them into, like, a floodgate of talking about their spirituality, but a lot of times not separating that from the struggle... of being a woman and being black.”

Frances spoke of claiming and living her multiple oppressed identities, with her very existence in the world making a powerful spiritual statement. “I’ve always had this, this sense that... there’s something about the fact that I exist as a woman, a lesbian, African-American, Native American, those are all very... not so much marginal as hazardous... things to be in a lot of places... so... that I still exist and that many like us still exist... I’ve always thought that I live, that’s a powerful statement. Every time I show up here... I show my face, that’s a profound statement, it’s a radical act, you know?”

When asked specifically to talk about themselves as women, they identified being nurturing as part of being a woman, therapist and spiritual. Frances commented, “…that nurturing side that I think is innately female, that giving birth to stuff, that sort of opening up, you know, letting things come through kind of stuff... I think women know more about that than anything else.” Ellen also talked about being nurturing. “I think through the nurturing, you know, I am kind of an earth mother. I am, like that natural, you know, granola... holistic...” She further commented, “…the reasons I like being a woman I think are because I’m allowed more access to those nurturing, spiritually healing [ways of being].” Ann talked about caring for clients in a manner that a woman or mother might care, emphasizing, “…I think there’s a sense of safety, a sense of balance that we offer, a sense of nurturing.”
Other women who at first were not permitted to embrace or felt prohibited from embracing spirituality in their work as therapists spoke about the power of reclaiming, integrating, and living out their various dimensions of identity, being able to truly bring their whole person into the counseling process. Some of the women spoke about their training or early career experiences in which the topic of spirituality in counseling was more taboo at the time. When asked about aspects of being a woman that have informed her sense of spirituality, Samantha Ann talked about her struggle of not wanting to be discounted as a therapist because she was a woman and because she drew on spirituality. “[A]s a woman I felt especially vulnerable to being judged that I wasn’t being professional enough, you know, I was just being a sentimental woman.” Samantha Ann shared that early in her career, she would try to push aside an awareness or insight for fear of being seen as “out there” or unprofessional. She spoke about initially being more “underground” about incorporating spirituality. Ellen also spoke about quietly incorporating spirituality into therapy. “I think many therapists, but I wonder if particularly women therapists, have always done spiritual things in their sessions, but they don’t talk about them as spiritual things … If we can define it broadly, I’m totally spiritual in my sessions…. But in my training and experience, you just didn’t call it that. That just wasn’t OK. So I sort of wonder if it’s that kind of subversive thing like, Yeah, we do it all the time. We just don’t call it that…”

Samantha Ann and Ellen both went on to talk about experiencing more receptivity to spirituality within the field more recently and naturally bringing it into their work with more outward acknowledgment. Samantha Ann commented, “And then, of course, over the years…there seemed to be a bit more awareness of the possibility of at least talking
about when religion had a negative impact on someone, that you could talk about it. But it was really wonderful when the holistic health program, um, came...because then some people started, talking just a bit more about some of those spiritual things and so, you know, it was like, OK here's my opening.” Ellen shared, “I think it was just organic...I think some of what happened is after I got out of graduate school, um, that’s when I kind of had the freedom, and I do think it’s when I really started attending the Unitarian church...that really got me thinking about...how does spirituality play a role. Um, and I do think it just kind of naturally started coming up more. I became more aware of it in myself. And because I use myself as a tool a lot, I think that that awareness then just kind of naturally played out.” Frances also talked about her experience of spirituality in the counseling process as natural and organic. “...That allowed me then to do the spiritual stuff in a way that was more... cohesive is the word that comes to mind, but... so I think it was really an organic developmental process for me.”

Spirituality and Diversity

In discussing spirituality, the women also highlighted diversity. For the women, spirituality seemed to be complex and deeply personal, intersecting with all aspects of identity. Ellen spoke about spirituality as an aspect of identity that “…spreads across all of the identities. I think of religion as being more like race or gender or sexual orientation. I think of spirituality as being kind of … it integrates all of those.” Samantha Ann spoke about spirituality as a dimension of diversity, yet also more than that. “Well I...What I have found, is that calling it diversity has legitimized looking at religion and spirituality...So for me it’s functional...It feels to me...like a little more than some other aspects of diversity, but I don’t know. I really don’t...And yet, you know,
sometimes when I think of other aspects of diversity, I don’t think they’re as simple as we make them by calling them simply a multi-cultural diversity component either...So it’s just part of our human complexity as far as I’m concerned.” Frances seemed to best illustrate the complexity of spirituality as an aspect of human diversity through metaphor. “Well, you know, I think, as far as diversity goes, I think the way people feel and experience their own spirituality is right up there with the thumbprint, you know. It’s all different...it’s all how we hold our heads and our hearts, you know, in this world.”

Specifically, the women acknowledged spirituality as a dimension of human experience that intersects with other dimensions of identity. Ellen stated, “I think it shows up in my work because it’s a part of who I am, and as with the other dimensions of human experience, I [am] taking a holistic approach to things, that’s a really important part to understand, however big or small a role it plays for a person...I think there’s an awareness of that dimension being there and being pretty integrated into all the other aspects.... I’ve heard people say I, I have absolutely zero spirituality, and I, I don’t know if I ever really buy that...because I think... that’d be like somebody saying I never have any emotions...I never have a thought...it’s like, you can’t help it. It’s part of the human experience.”

The women embraced a broad, inclusive view of spirituality, honoring that there are many different spiritual paths. In talking about her perspective as a member of the Unitarian church, Ellen stated, “…one of the things that Unitarians talk about sometimes is one light, many windows, which is sort of like this idea that there, and not all Unitarians believe this, but there’s sort of one source or whatever, but there are lots of
ways to, to get to it, or, you know, there’s the top of the mountain but lots of ways to, lots of paths to get to the top, and I think that that’s pretty much the way I see spirituality.”

They also commented on spirituality being unique to every person and recognized the importance of not imposing one’s own sense of spirituality on clients. To that end, some of the women made efforts to ask each client about experiences with spirituality and faith, gain an understanding of the client’s cultural context, and be open to drawing upon the client’s sense of spirituality as a potential coping resource. Rebecca stated, “I think it’s important to know how people make meaning in their lives, and then cultural context is a big part of that, so getting an understanding of how someone came to be who they are... I think everybody has culture, so I try to do a cultural analysis of every client. I think sometimes in multicultural training we tend to see race and ethnicity as culture, and other people don’t have culture, and that’s really wrong, and, and I see culture pretty broadly defined...socio-economic, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality.” Similarly, Ellen spoke about seeking to understand and willingness to draw on a client’s spirituality as a resource in counseling. “I’m really comfortable with... if somebody wants to pray, or... they talk a lot about their... faith... what I really do is try to see how they incorporate it and how they see, think about what spirituality is, so in some ways it just adds another dimension to the work... I think a lot of my role is to try to understand that, and, again, you know, that’s biased by my own idea that we all have our truths with little t’s, you know, and I want to understand what the truths are for the people I work with so that I can, you know, figure out how that could be helpful to them.”

The women also talked about how learning about diversity issues helped them to grapple with the complexity and diversity inherent in spirituality. For Ellen, learning
about diversity issues helped her to examine multiple aspects of identity, including spirituality. “[W]here I did get a lot of mentoring and inspiration was around diversity issues. Probably particularly around race and gender. And I think that once I got the process of that, then it was pretty easy to transition to applying that to other things, like social class, and spirituality, and um, that there is kind of a process of, I don’t know how I would describe it, a way of thinking about things, a way of opening myself to things... and I think particularly opening myself to vulnerability. And self-awareness.” In a similar vein, Samantha Ann connected learning about diversity with openness to complexity. She spoke about majoring in psychology and religion and trying to incorporate both. Samantha Ann shared learning about multiculturalism, diversity, and different perspectives from an African-American psychologist in her church. She commented that this experience, “...gave me that opportunity to see things, uh, I think in a more complex and diverse way rather than just sort of uh, in the more narrow way that I was getting out of my undergraduate classes.”

Spirituality as Ever Present

For the women in this study, spirituality was ever present for them, and they consequently viewed it as being present in the counseling process, even at times when they were not consciously aware of it or talking about it directly. Ann stated, “For me, it feels like a way of life. It feels like a safe way to be that I don’t have to hide or be ashamed of who I am...So, it feels like it’s always present.” Carmen stated “...so sense of spirituality, I see it as underlying just about everything. I see it as something everyone has, whether they admit it or not, that it’s ...a part just like the intellect and the emotions and physical self, I believe there’s a spiritual self.” She also commented, “I think that the
spirituality is part of the process and that without it there’d be no process.” When asked about spirituality being vital to the counseling process itself, China expressed concern about imposing her valuing of spirituality on an atheist client. This concept of not imposing one’s own sense of spirituality on the client is further addressed in the section entitled “Joining the Client and Honoring their Way of Being.” Rather than speaking of spirituality as vital to the counseling process, which she then felt would be imposing her own values on her clients, China talked about spirituality instead as a vital part of herself and of then bringing herself to the counseling process. “I think I’d feel more comfortable if I said, spirituality is a vital part of me, of me being a therapist, of me being a woman, of me being a mother. And, so I bring myself to the counseling process, and so in that sense, it's vital.” Thus, many of the women recognized spirituality as a foundation for themselves. Frances described counseling as a spiritual process, conveying in a powerful way the ancient aspect of it. “I think counseling is a spiritual process, um...you know, there's something metaphysical about speaking and saying how you feel, letting your feelings be known...I think that's a spiritual issue. I think...metaphysical, you know, kind of stuff that comes into play when we’re trusting, when we’ve decided to um...lay down some of our burdens kind of thing. I think there’s a, I think it’s an ancient concept, and I think there’s some spirituality in that.” Likewise, Carmen spoke about therapy as healing and both concepts as spiritual.

Something Larger than Self

Although articulating it in a variety of ways, the women experienced spirituality within the counseling process as something larger than self. They described it as a presence or force that is working and can be accessed, but is something beyond what we
as humans know or understand. Ellen stated, “I don’t think that there’s a, a higher being that sort of pulls strings or does any of that stuff, but that there’s something bigger than my brain can hold about life, you know, and about the universe, and so I, I just get to the point where it’s like I, I just can’t know. ... [I]n some ways I had to stop grappling with it too much because it was too anxiety-provoking, so for me it’s just this sort of undefined experience. I know it when I have it... I know it when I feel kind of spiritual... it’s just something that’s kind of above everything else. That’s how I would describe it.” Carmen shared, “I love what I do, ... and when it’s present, when I feel its presence... it’s almost as if... there’s some other force working... I could never write down a plan for what would happen in a counseling interview, ever. I can give a general guideline, but there is no way I could write it down because I have no idea what’s going to happen. It’s going to happen out of something else, and yes, it’s, that’s why I say like music and art, yes, we have the instruments, and yes, we have the skills, and yes, we have the notes, and yes, but where does the symphony come from, you know? That’s what’s happening in this process.”

The women talked about depending on a power greater than themselves, recognizing that they are not in charge, surrendering to this power for guidance. Elfy stated “…it wasn’t my client and it wasn’t me, it was, it was definitely the power of something greater than either of us, and just allowing that to really work in the counseling process is...a real gift.” Ellen articulated this as “…something bigger than me, there’s a bigger process than me at work here, and I just need to follow it. I just need to go with it, and when I can surrender like that I think really powerful things happen.” Frances also shared her experience of spirituality as something larger happening within the counseling
process. “I think there’s a, an occasion where I will reframe something for somebody, and it will be just so really right on and you can tell they’re resonating with it, or it’s kind of like this “ah-ha” kind of thing, you know, and that feels almost spiritual.” China spoke about her belief in personal responsibility but also not being in charge and instead being able to surrender to something greater than herself. “We’ve got a role and responsibility but a lot of it’s beyond our control, and I think I feel some sense of relief about that because I think sometimes as therapists you can feel like ahhhh you’ve gotta get it all figured out, you gotta know, you gotta do, you know and all that. And I’m like no, if I really believe that the world is like not in my control why do I think when I close the door and I’m in here with this one person or I’m in a group that like all of the sudden now I’m in charge….And I gotta get it all figured out. No. I don’t think that…So, I think that’s a way then that spirituality comes up for me is like in my willingness to like turn it over, let it go…..”

In talking about being open to this sense of something larger at work, Elfy and Rebecca both described being a conduit or vessel and drawing on greater wisdom and healing energy. Rebecca stated, “I actually see God as an entire network of energy, of which I’m a part of it, you’re a part of it,…every living thing is a nodule on that energy [belt], and as a therapist I’m trying to help that energy…heal wounds of clients.” Elfy also spoke about spirituality in the counseling process in a similar manner. “I guess how I experience it most often is that… you know how you hear about Alice Walker…she writes a lot and thinks a lot about… that she’s sort of a conduit, that the ancestors are… speaking through her, that the words that are coming out of her onto the paper are not of her, they’re from the ancestors, and that’s how I feel in the counseling process. I have no
idea where some of the things that come out of my mouth even come from, you know, and that to me is very spiritual...[W]hen I'm really listening to someone's heart and providing an opportunity for them to, to really speak from the heart... there is absolutely a kind of magic that occurs in, in that moment... that allows me to be, I guess, a vessel of sorts... I feel like some of the things that I'm saying, I'm saying because... a higher power or God... is channeling that through me...."

The women also experienced spirituality as the power of people helping each other and a sense of interconnectedness. Erin spoke about the power of the process within group work. “I think that with group, group process that happens a lot more, where you just feel that, that something was working in there that just really isn’t you, or that you were a part of, but you really weren’t controlling it, which is hard for me because I like to control... It was sort of the power of the process and of, you know, God working for these addicts, and you’re, you’re allowed to say ‘God’ in those circles. You’re allowed to say ‘higher power.’ You’re allowed to talk about spirituality.” Likewise, Ellen talked about experiencing spirituality in the counseling process as a world that is co-created between the therapist and client, “…by sharing our stories we create a different world, and that, I think that’s a spiritual world because I think it’s bigger than each of us....”

The women described spirituality within the counseling process as trusting that things are happening for a reason and believing that they are connected to certain clients for a reason and are brought together by something larger. China described it as “…some bigger sense of what’s happening now is informed in some way.” She went on to share an experience of being brought together with a supervisee. China first shared her own negative experience with supervision as a trainee, as well as her own struggle with having
to transfer a male client because she was afraid of him. She spoke about how this helped her to support a current supervisee around a similar issue and her belief that it was not a coincidence that they ended up working together. "So that's where to me like, there's something that happens in the universe that that's how [she] and I ended up in the same place at the same time... in that moment, there's a gift...that happens, because of what I went through and what I could allow [her] to do in that moment. So, that's what excites me sometimes is like, like, I, I feel like that's not a coincidence. That that was supposed to happen in that kind of way, and I get great comfort in that." For Frances, trusting that things are happening for a reason is also a source of comfort. "...[M]y insecurities are soothed if I can get into, like a, you know, real spiritual kind of thing and, and just trust that things are going to go the way they should and that they're going to happen for whatever reason and I'm okay."

Holding the Client's Pain

This sense of spirituality as something larger than self that can be accessed for support is present for the women in their work as therapists. Spirituality serves as a source of strength and a resource in holding the client's pain and hearing difficult stories. Frances spoke about getting in touch with her sense of caring, a spiritual foundational element for her as a therapist, to help her hold a client's pain. "[T]hat practice of being present and caring and wanting to connect... kind of serves my bottom line for me...As long as I'm sitting here caring about them then I'm doing what I need to do, and it's a good thing, and it's an important thing, and everyone is served." Ann also spoke about her spirituality as helping her to sit with a client's pain and about recognizing her presence as therapeutic. "I guess some pain is hard to sit with...and so probably what
helps me is, is the hope that they can get better, that they can overcome this and that it’s only a temporary state... I’ve also come to understand that ... it’s not a temporary state for everybody, some people are going to have it as a more permanent state ... I guess what helps me kind of sit with them...is my belief, and also... part of my spirituality is that everybody deserves some nurturing, some care, some understanding....”

Carmen framed the concept of holding a client’s pain as taking care of herself in order to take care of others. She emphasized the role of spirituality in allowing her to do so. “I believe that that is spirituality that makes that possible. The... one of the hardest things that my students have had, and I think a lot of my colleagues have had is letting, letting go of your work when you get home. And so part of the holding of the client’s or the student’s pain is also to be able to put it somewhere so that you can go on and live. And that, to me, is indeed a spiritual endeavor because I could not do that all by myself I don’t think. It’s almost like there’s...a power greater that can take that a while, lift that burden so that I can go on with...my other life and then when needed, return to help again with it, to not carry it as my own... it isn’t that you have ever diminished it, it’s just that for a time you are not holding it; someone else is actually, in my mind. I give it up for a while and say okay now when I’m back I’ll take it on again....I experience it wholly when I’m with them. So something is helping me not experience it wholly when I’m not there. Spirituality sounds like the thing to me.”

China talked about her ability to hold the client’s pain as a therapist as a gift from God, recognizing that there is something larger than just herself present in the process. “Um, hearing difficult stories, learning to hold the client's pain as a therapist, that especially fits for me because I really feel like that's a gift that I got from God. Like, I
don't think that, that a lot of people can really sit with people's pain, and I don't think
that's something I did, and I don't think it's something that I got taught. I think it's
something that I have that gift and that that doesn't come from me.... I think we all have
talents and gifts and I think some of them we have cultivated in some ways. But, it's kind
of like when you talk about psychology and therapy and like, is it an art or is it a science?
And, while I think it's both, I think for me it's more of an art. And in that art, it feels like
there's something deep inside of me that I was given, a gift that I was given from God,
my idea of God, um, that allows me to be present to people in a way that I don't think it's
anything that I did....I just think that there's a way that somehow people's pain does not
scare me, and that is a gift that I have been given to use in this way, and it's part of why I
know being a therapist is the absolute right thing for me to do....”

Elfy also shared feeling helped by something larger than herself. She also spoke
about holding a client’s pain as instinctive and natural, commenting that it seems to be
the essence of what she does as a therapist “When you started talking about that I just
thought about... ‘Jesus wept.’ ... [I]t’s okay to hear really intense stories and to still feel
emotion... and if on occasion I’m feeling the emotion to the extent that my clients can
see that I’m feeling the emotion, that’s all right too, you know. I am a human being, but
I’m, I’m being helped through the process by something greater than myself.”

Erin shared that she tends to draw on her own spiritual sense of self and beliefs to
help her in holding a client’s pain. “… I think sometimes if you tell yourself, like, gosh I
must be here for a reason or this is really what I’m supposed to be doing, I truly feel like
I’m put here for a reason, I feel like I’m probably working with these addicts for a reason.
If you can kind of think existentially... there’s probably a reason why this person ended...
up on my case load, and there’s probably a reason why they’re talking with me, and just being able to connect with me, perhaps, there’s something I can offer them that will help, and I think just knowing that that is kind of my purpose and just doing that for people I think helps.”

Faith also allows Samantha Ann to be present and not turn away from a client’s pain. “I mean it is what allows me to hear all of that, and sit with all of that, and be present with all of that, … and not feel overwhelmed or discouraged or hopeless. And sometimes what seems like some very overwhelming and, and hopeless situations that they’ll present…What it does for me to be able to…that allows me to be able to… in all these years, still be there and not have to turn away from the pain or not have to um, get caught up in that feeling of powerlessness or hopelessness… And I have always said to them, ‘It’s because of my faith. It’s because of my spiritual beliefs… I have this trust that there is a way, and we’re gonna find a way to figure things out.’ And I find that that’s very… reassuring to them, I think, in a lot of ways. I think it models for them that… if you can be more connected to your spiritual self…it does give them some additional hope.” Thus, Samantha Ann’s ability to be present to the client’s pain helps to instill hope and models connection to one’s sense of spirituality.

Frances spoke about pain having purpose and about not rushing to alleviate pain but instead allowing the process to unfold. “…[T]hat age-old wisdom of laying down your burdens… there is something to be said for feeling in general…you have to consider the uses of adversity…and I think sometimes pain has a purpose … for learning about yourself, for… really having to look at yourself, looking at sources of pain, same as sources of joy…[W]e automatically think that alleviating, alleviating the pain is what we
should try to do and try to do as quickly as we can, but from a spiritual perspective, you
know, it’s kind of like that whole butterfly thing, you know, you pull the butterfly out of
the cocoon, well, you’ve caused damage...It’s not without its purpose. I don’t like it. I
don’t enjoy it, but, you know, I think there’s some...level of being conscious about the
pain as opposed to just sort of feeling it, then it can be a real powerful kind of thing....”

Self-Care

Just as spirituality serves as a resource in holding the client’s pain during therapy,
so too can it be accessed as a resource and source of support in the women’s lives outside
of therapy. For the women, spirituality was present in their own self-care. Carmen drew
a connection between needing to take care of herself so that she could care for others in
her life, including her clients and their pain. “I’m more apt to talk about it as taking care
of yourself in order to take care of others, and that if we do not take care of ourselves
then we are too weak, too vulnerable and unable to help with that pain. And one of the
ways of taking care of ourselves is allowing ourselves to put that aside when we are
not... in their presence working with them...I can remember when I didn’t do it very
well,...when I would be at home and I just could not stop thinking about it,... almost like
I was living...their pain. And I went to my own therapist...and she’s the one who said to
me if you can’t take care of yourself you can’t take care of others. And I think that put it
back on personal responsibility, which is also part of existentialism, but I think it’s part
of... an understanding of what’s important in that meaning and spiritual stuff too. It all
goes together for me....”

For Ann, her self-care involves the social aspect of spirituality and hope through
witnessing others. “[S]pirituality, like I said, it’s so intertwined with everything that I
am, I’m, I’m active in... the community and in my church, and I tell people, um, spirituality to me is also a social aspect because it’s, it’s generally maybe the one time a week when I see people of color specifically....[F]or me, spirituality is, is, is a way of reaffirming who I am, um, and so that’s a way of taking care of myself...[T]he other way is, um, of seeing young people and, and, um, seeing the future and seeing how enthusiastic they are about, um, their spiritualness, and sometimes how much they know... just being able to kind of understand people.... myself through others.”

Through connection with others, nature, cultivating balance in life, being in the moment, and choosing to be around people and participate in activities that feed oneself spiritually the women engaged in the spiritual process of their own self-care. Erin articulated the importance of feeding herself spiritually and the impact this has on her as a therapist. “I think that... I’m a better therapist now than I’ve ever been. Well, experience, but also just that as long as I can stay connected with who I am and continue, continuing to kind of stay healthy and feed myself spiritually by praying and doing all that stuff, which I’m not saying I do very well all the time, but if I can do that I know I walk into my sessions centered and different than if I’m not taking care of myself... if I’m not praying, if I’m not feeling spiritually connected, if I’m not feeling confident in myself, if I’m having a down day or a tired day. I think feeding yourself spiritually also has to do with, like, making sure you eat right.... And exercise and all that stuff...I think you have to be very well-grounded, healthy, taken care of, and that includes, you know, being comfortable spiritually too...So I think your spirituality and prayer and being okay with who you are has a lot to do with how effective of a therapist you are, and I think when I leave the session I think, that was a really good session; I really think the client
got a lot out of it, those are the days that I’m spiritually grounded.” Thus, spirituality was present for these women in their own self-care, which in turn impacted their work in therapy and the counseling process.

Connection

The theme of connection was extremely powerful in the women’s stories. The women spoke of connection as core to the healing process. All of the women experienced spirituality in the counseling process as connection. The women emphasized connection with the larger community, interconnectedness with all living things, whether through church, nature, or bonding with animals, feeling connected to a greater whole. Carmen and Samantha Ann both shared examples of clients connecting with nature or animals in their healing, commenting on forming bonds with all living things, similar to Ellen’s belief in an “interdependent web of all living things.” Elfy expressed her hope that clients leave therapy knowing that “…they’re not walking on this planet alone…That’s pretty much it, you know, that they’re just, that we are not in community just with ourselves.” Ann emphasized the role connection with a larger community can play in healing. “[Connection to community is] pretty important to me, whether it’s on campus or off campus, and I know, you know, as a diversity person, sometimes when we’re going through some issues, um, having a connection outside a university is important, or having a community outside the university is important, and, um, so connecting people with community to me seems really important…sometimes we do need to be reminded of some of the more important aspects of what we do and what’s important to young people and to working with their lives, and, and, and being interconnected… that the picture is even bigger than you and the client sometimes, and I
think we forget that.” Elfy shared an example of encouraging a client in seeking support from her larger church community. “So what happened there was I had encouraged her to contact different people who were part of her support group, and encourage them to think about her or to pray for her or whatever... and even though she’s a very, very devout Catholic, that is not something that she would have even thought of doing... so I feel like... helping clients to, to see that they are not as isolated as, as, you know, many often think that we are, and that there’s a whole community out there of people... who are willing to, you know, hold you up.”

Likewise, the connection between the client and therapist within the counseling process was highlighted. The women described relationships as a place where spirituality exists, and they emphasized the therapeutic alliance, joining with, connecting to, and understanding the client as vital. Rebecca described the importance of connection in her work with a suicidal client. “One, I’m aligning with the part of them that wants to live because they wouldn’t be in here talking to me if there wasn’t a part of them that wanted to live and a part of them that wanted to die, so I’m aligning with the part that wants to live. I’m giving hope and saying that there’s, there, it doesn’t have to be this way, it could be different. And I’m making a human connection, and sometimes it’s making that human connection is the most important element of the three because if I can connect to them, then they’re connected to something other than their pain, and that is the conduit by which they can accept hope. That is the conduit by which the part of them that wants to live can find another way, so that’s very spiritual too.” The importance of spirituality, hope, and connection is also articulated by Samantha Ann. “I think the client’s experience, or the aspect of spirituality that influences them, has to do with where they
are with hope, with finding meaning in the life events that they're confronting, with a sense of worthwhileness, with a belief in their connectedness to others and other things, and then in really honoring their own inner wisdom.” Samantha Ann also emphasized the role connection plays in the therapy relationship, “I think the relationship is impacted by a sense of connectedness between us and that trust that then develops, and it sort of opens more to really exploring the inner self.”

Thus, connection serves as a powerful foundation in the counseling process. It is the connection that leads to healing, and it is spirituality that takes the therapy relationship to a different depth, a deeper connection. Ellen stated, “I think sometimes in relationships I feel that, that there’s really this powerful sense of energy or this powerful sense of connection that transcends, like, any moment, or in some ways I think that’s why I like doing therapy is those moments when the connection is bigger than the, the two or more individuals who are coming together, and powerful, like, powerfully affects both people who are interacting.” She further stated, “I think the way I, I envision spirituality in terms of the relationship is that when spirituality is present in a way that’s healing there’s...a world that’s created here between two people, and it’s a combination of what they bring, and it’s sort of between us. When that’s not there it’s almost like there’s a lopsided feeling to it, or it’s not here, it’s there and here, and there’s that separateness, so I think I do feel like in the spirituality part there’s a kind of joining. There’s a kind of connection and a kind of—which kind of goes back to some of what I was saying earlier about...I think relationships are a major place where spirituality exists.”

A sense of safety, acceptance and non-judgment, compassion, validation, and the experience of being heard and understood were elements the women discussed in relation
to connection within the therapy relationship. Carmen and Samantha Ann both spoke about creating a safe space for talking about spirituality. Carmen stated, “And so how it contributes to the counseling process, I think, is that opening that door and making it clear that that’s a safe topic with me allows, allows the clients to bring it up whenever they want to and however they want to.” Samantha Ann spoke about opening the door to talk about spirituality but not imposing it. “Yeah, it’s not just talking about spiritual issues. I mean, certainly I do with many clients talk about spiritual issues if that’s what they want to do. It’s not something I impose at all. I will invite sometimes to say, you know, ‘do you have a spiritual… feeling or concept about things or a certain way that you approach things that could be helpful to you that we could look at?’ I mean, I’ll invite that, but if they go ‘no,’ it’s like ‘okay.’ But for many people...I find they’re eager; they’re relieved somebody’s willing to talk to them about it, and so then they open up quite a bit because if someone’s going to let them talk about it and it’s a safe place to do it, they’re going to share. So I will invite as it’s appropriate, and then we go there.” Ellen spoke about the connection between safety and deepening of the therapy relationship. “I think what I believe is that the deeper and more authentic the relationship is, the more spiritual it can be, that, and I don’t think deeper necessarily means... psychologically minded. I think it means safety, what risks the person is willing to take, how understood they feel, how open I feel like they are to me and my authentic interest...” She also spoke about spirituality being present in the therapy relationship through an underlying sense of security. “I think I do associate spirituality both with ... a positive association and also... I don’t know if I’d describe it as a softness, and maybe that’s the feminine stuff too, where...there’s a safety and security and a, an okayness, like, it’s going to be
okay ... I think in some ways that’s how it can show up in relationship, that, you know, it’s okay here, you know, it’s, sometimes we may not connect, sometimes it may feel lopsided, sometimes, you know, there may be empathic failures, but this underlying, sustaining sense that it’s okay”

Carmen shared the following example that highlights safety and openness in the therapy relationship, as well as a willingness to identify the client’s difficulties lying within her needs not being met in Midwestern society, rather than pathologizing the client. “[T]he problem is that she was Latin American, and her family’s religion, while Roman Catholic, was not what she was getting here in midwestern [laughs.] And it included a very strong, almost psychic, piece of paranormal experience, talking with the dead, having the dead present at important occasions, including them, having, lighting candles and, I mean, death was much more with them in their life than we allow it to be. That’s another thing that’s too taboo in our lives. And so she was just like this [makes gesture illustrating hesitant] about approaching me about these things, you know, and when she found that I was not put off, I was not telling her it was wrong ...she didn’t really have as much of a problem as she needed a person. She needed a woman because this all mostly had to do with her mother, and she needed a woman who was open to hearing about something that was not what we all expect.”

Thus, non-judgment and acceptance are also vital to connection within the therapy relationship. Erin shared, “I think a big part of what I want to convey to my clients in the counseling process is that...I’m not going anywhere, that I am a rock for them, and that they can cry or laugh or be whoever they are, and I’m not going to judge them...I’m okay with whoever they are as a person.” Samantha Ann shared her experience of working
with a client who asked questions about Samantha Ann’s ability to be accepting and compassionate. “[This client] also continued to carry with her the guilt of some of what she had done…and it was very, very difficult for her to make peace with that, and she would get angry with me that I could accept her….And she’s one of the people when she said to me, ‘how can you possibly forgive some of these things that I’ve done, how can you just accept them and not…?’ And I said, ‘that’s part of my spirituality; that’s part of who I am is seeing the pain and having compassion for that rather than trying to judge that.’” Thus, Samantha Ann emphasized and modeled cultivating compassion rather than judgment. Carmen further illustrated the impact of acceptance in her work with LGBT clients and the hope this instills for further acceptance by others. “I’m usually getting people who are just deciding to come out of the closet, so to speak, but that doesn’t mean that people haven’t known, and that doesn’t mean that people haven’t tormented them in some way, or that they haven’t even just felt, because of everything they hear, see, and do, that they are wrong. You know, to live your whole life thinking you’re wrong has got to be dealt with by more than one little human being saying ‘that’s not so.’ And so, to me, that takes all of this other, this… bigger-than-us something that can help me and help this person so that together we can establish what makes sense to us…I don’t believe I have ever done work with a transgendered person where they didn’t know that I am very big on spirituality by the…time we got into things because I probably brought it up more than I would ordinarily. I wanted… people to understand that my acceptance was not something that just came out of a book, that my acceptance came out of who I am as a person and that there are a lot of people like me, and that they can also interact with people like me. I’m not the only one on the planet that will accept them as they are.”
In addition to safety and acceptance, feeling heard and understood was identified by the women as a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. Erin spoke about the power of feeling understood. "I think that the underlying human need for all of us, the universal human need—this is my little belief about everybody—is that we all just want to be understood by somebody. I mean, I think that everyone needs to feel understood, and I think when I have a client that doesn’t feel like anyone in their life gets them, I feel like it’s my job to show them that I get it, and so that they leave not feeling like nobody gets them, not feeling so alone like that because I know my need is that I want, I want someone to get it." She went on to state, "I think normalizing...is sometimes our role, and...I think that there’s a real strong connection when you can look at someone and say, ‘you know what, that sounds about right to me,’ and you see just everything go, oh, okay. I think there’s, that’s when I start to see that connection is when I can affect them to the point where I can see them physically, like, relax, just by saying, ‘oh my gosh, I would feel that way too’ or ‘yeah, no kidding, that is hard,’ or, you know, just very small little, like, basic therapy skills...like reflection of feeling and empathy, and, you know, respect and really showing that you’re listening with your nonverbals... As long as that person knows that you’re listening, I think that there’s a real, you know, power in that, like, finally they’re being heard by somebody." Frances also commented on the power of being understood in the therapy relationship. "I always think the...caring and the present piece is the most effective thing anybody can do ... from my own experience, if I trust that someone is really feeling what I’m saying and really cares about where I am and wants to go there with me, I’m going to fare better. I’m not going to be alone."
As detailed in the preceding examples, spirituality was present in the counseling process as connection for all of the women. They identified safety, acceptance, non-judgment, compassion, and being heard and understood as elements contributing to connection within the therapy relationship. Whether it was to community, living beings, a greater whole or within the therapy relationship, connection served as a foundation in the counseling process, leading to healing.

Trust

Trust also emerged as a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. The women talked about the importance of establishing trust in the therapeutic relationship, as well as trusting the therapy process. Erin spoke about trust in the therapy relationship and its role in helping to increase connectedness. “I think I can use who I am spiritually to make that rapport to help gain trust with my clients unless, if they feel like I don’t have a good sense of self, I don’t feel like they can trust that I can help them...I think the more rapport you build and the more the client’s able to disclose information and the more trust you build, I think that connectedness is absolutely different, and that ups, kind of, the spiritual feeling of the session.” Ellen talked about trust in the therapy relationship allowing vulnerability. “[I]t kind of relates back to the relational part of it and the vulnerability. Um, I think when people can be vulnerable... It’s potential. That any time we interact with someone there’s potential for vulnerability, but that taking the risk to actually be vulnerable and to have it be OK, and actually empowering, I think that’s a really spiritual process.” Erin also spoke about trusting the process and trusting herself. “I think part of what I tell myself to do is if I don’t know what to say, then I need to shut up and just listen, and it will come. And I think that’s, there’s sort of a spiritual
component in that, to sort of trust the process, and just trust that... I’ll know what to do as soon as it’s the right time,...So I think learning to trust myself to listen is kind of a spiritual component to the whole thing....”

Additionally, the women identified spirituality as being present in their trust of the client’s process and the client’s inner wisdom. Frances stated, “You know, there’s this piece that has to trust their process, even though you don’t know where they’re going a lot of times. You just have to trust theirs, that they’ve got something going on, that you know, this is happening for a reason...Something’s going on, and I think that’s a spiritual kind of approach.” Likewise, the women talked about trusting themselves and their own inner wisdom or intuition. Samantha Ann shared, “I think my part of the spirituality in the counseling process is that it influences my awareness of all these factors, allows me to honor them in recognizing that the client may be where they need to be at the time, but it especially helps me focus on inner wisdom, trusting in theirs, but also really trusting in mine... and especially trusting in mine when it runs contrary to those... dogmas around psychology.”

China talked about teaching clients to trust themselves and rely on their strengths, referring specifically to her work with a chronically suicidal client. “But in the end, my belief about therapy, being a woman, and spirituality is, we are much better off to focus on the strength, the best, and build on that. Instead of seeing the worst and go with the fear and that kind of stuff. So, that would be a client that, I would have to go home and every time that client went through my head or every time I was afraid before I saw that client again...If you’re gonna really live out what you believe, then you have to trust the
best in you. Which is if you show the client that you believe in her, then she can start believing in herself.”

Being Present

Another way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process is by the therapist being present to the client. The women emphasized the importance of staying in the present, being spiritually grounded in order to do so, and being genuine and authentic within the therapy relationship. Frances spoke of the importance of being present and connected. “...[M]y experience of spirituality in the counseling process has been kind of what I’ve mentioned before, that whole importance of being present... I don’t think I could really connect with someone who is in pain or distressed or confused about something, moving ahead of them or circling around them, trying to figure out...which theory...or which diagnosis, or...what next question am I going to ask, and you know, just kind of being still with them, and um, taking on some things, kind of courageously and quietly for them, being there...” Frances shared that leaning on spirituality helped her to feel genuine, which in turn contributed to her ability to be present in the counseling process.

China also spoke about being present in the sense of empowering the client to share what is most present to them in session and allowing the process to unfold. She shared that in her work with therapists in training, she encourages them to be present to their clients rather than becoming tied to their own agendas and missing what is happening in the moment for the client. China spoke about how she does this with her clients. “So, for instance, a lot of times, even if I have an idea of where I think we need to go, I might start the session and say... last week, or two weeks ago, or whatever, we
said we were going to focus in on this and I just wanted to check in first and make sure, given what's happened in your life the last few weeks, is that where we need to go today. And to really empower them to be the one to kind of decide that...because I'm wanting to make sure that I'm present to where they are that particular day, and you can never know that, you can never know what happens in somebody's life between the time that you see them, and I realize how much power I've got, so I want to do everything I can to kind of invite them to be the one that's present to whatever it is that's going on with them.”

Being in the present also includes awareness of the client’s context. Rebecca stated, “You work with the issue that they come in with, but you work with that issue in the context of what else it’s connected to and what else it could be connected to, so it’s really, it’s about pace in a way. It’s really trying to tune in on what the client, where the client is...with their issue, where they are developmentally in their process...So it’s very much about working in the present in the context of who they are and how they are in the world.” It follows then, that meeting the client where they are is also a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process.

Joining the Client and Honoring their Way of Being

The women talked about honoring the client’s way of being in the world, joining them where they are, and attending to their needs. Ann spoke about meeting the client where they are as a way of valuing them. “...[A]nother way we value them is by starting where they’re at... if they know you don’t have a hidden agenda or you’re just not trying to do something, but you’re really kind of trying to meet them where they’re at. I, I think that’s helpful to them.” China shared an example of joining clients where they are and working with their belief system. She spoke about talking about prayer as a source of
support with two clients who are priests. "...[E]specially with these two priest in particular... sometimes its almost like I'm giggling a little bit inside because I'm seeing that like they're not using prayer, they're not, in their own life, they're not using prayer, they're not using like what might God want you to do about this or whatever...And I think that there might be some people in psychology that would think you shouldn't do that, that's not psychology...But to me, it's meet that person where they are. Now, I would not say that to a person that I didn't know already that that fit with their faith base and their language....So for me to say, like, when you were struggling with this this week, did you pray about this? Did you talk to God about this? Whatever, feels very appropriate to me because it's like I'm entering their world. That's not me bringing religion into the room, because that would make me comfortable or that's what I need them to be for me. On the other hand this client that I have right now that's atheist, and is a international graduate student, I mean, the worst thing I think I could do with that particular client is act like she needs to have a faith base...it would totally be inappropriate with that client. It would be like needing her to be something to take care of me."

Thus, part of joining the client is honoring their way of being in the world. This includes learning about the client’s spiritual beliefs and using language and interventions that will make sense for the client. Rebecca stated, "I believe all religions are paths to...some sense of God, so I’m much more interested in how to help the client’s belief system work for them.” Samantha Ann spoke about her effort to use terms and language that are meaningful for the client. She shared a specific example of talking about the concept of forgiveness. "So I’m going to think in terms of how they can forgive self sometimes or
how they can forgive others, but we may talk about it differently. Sometimes we talk about making amends, and somehow making amends is somehow different than saying forgiving, you know. I mean, it’s learning to use the words that are going to make sense for them....” Samantha Ann also talked about not imposing her own sense of spirituality, and commented on her tendency to “…use more secular terms for what I think were really spiritual issues for the individual, but they don’t have to use spiritual terms if they don’t want to because that’s their path and that’s where we’ll go with it.” Thus, Samantha Ann conveyed a valuing of each client’s personal journey. Samantha Ann recognized the importance of taking into account the individual client, stating that “…it depends on who they are and…how they heal, how they learn....”

Tending to the Whole Person

Tending to the whole person was a way in which spirituality was present within the counseling process. The women emphasized the importance of understanding each client as a whole person with multiple dimensions of identity and experience. Ann shared her perspective on being an African-American woman who is a spiritual person, commenting that it is hard to separate out the multiple dimensions of her identity. “I guess that’s the way I see things as you can’t take parts of you out. You’re, you’re a whole person, and so you don’t know which one is more influencing at that time, but at least you can talk about that part, but it, it may be another component of another part over here too, and, and our goal is to, you know, interface everything or, you know, enmesh, or I don’t know about enmesh, but anyway, to interact or interface or, you know, intersect probably is the word I’m looking for...so yeah, I can see where they all work out. Yeah, I think it is hard, where some people do compartmentalize those, I find it difficult.”
The women also tended to the whole person by recognizing the various dimensions of human experience. Elfy and Ellen spoke about taking a holistic perspective and seeing the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection as important. Elfy stated, "I’m very purposeful about trying to provide a healing for, by which people can feel comfortable in, in my actual clinical space to… to heal from either, you know, the emotional issues, the physical issues, and the spiritual, and, and I, and I talk about that a lot with my clients, that when they come to see me that we’re not just going to be focused on what they, they are coming to see me about, which is usually some kind of deep emotional pain, but also we’re going to be thinking about who they are as physical people and who they are as spiritual people." Frances also shared a similar perspective. "I, um, regularly speak about the aspects of self, the emotional, the intellectual, the physical, the spiritual, and the social, and I pretty regularly check in with them about it." Erin spoke about how valuing the whole person relates to the interventions she chooses. "I prescribe a lot of homework, so I often encourage people…to look at treatment holistically, like, I know you take a medicine for depression, but that’s just a piece of it, and, you know, if you are often stressed and often struggling as far as chronic pain and you’re finding that your chronic pain is influencing your self-medicating, and how can we, you know, what can you do to deal with pain in a different way, and we’ll talk about going to a chiropractor, we’ll talk about acupuncture, we’ll talk about Eastern medicine, philosophy, you know, kind of, exercise, all of those pieces that help people feel healthier, more stable, less anxious, less pain, especially being an addiction specialist you’re always encouraging people to look outside the ‘let’s pop another pill’ kind of
realm. And I think that ...part of the spiritual piece is having people look holistically at treatment and not trying to quick-fix it and all that kind of stuff."

**Power and Empowerment**

Examining power dynamics within the therapy relationship, cultivating awareness of how power has been depicted and employed in religion, and helping to empower the client in their work together were also ways in which the women experienced spirituality in the counseling process. China explained her perspective on power and her own self-monitoring. "Well, I think first of all, I think being a feminist and being a therapist that I'm always very aware of the power piece. And so, it's, it's like what stuff do I bring into the room? And is that my stuff? And am I putting that on that person?" Rebecca also spoke about power in the sense of making room for her female image of God that was about empowerment. "So I think my gender system was looking at power as... spiritually, looking at a male God as being in control, sitting on a cloud, striking lightning or, or it wasn’t necessarily a negative God, but, but dictating, and my, my female image of God energy was much more from the earth and plowing the ground and the sense of power as empowerment. So power down and power from up. That was a gender-different way of looking at power, and I had to come to that kind of view of power to look at positive powers of therapists.” She further explained, “I hated that concept that I was going to be in control of clients or use that to sort of tell them what to do. The empowerment gave me another sort of way of looking at that. Now, I also do think we have an enormous amount of power over the clients, and owning our own power, and being responsible for our own power is a major part of learning to do this. But it's a female definition, an earth definition, a from-the-earth sort of place.” Erin also spoke
about her goal of empowerment in the therapy relationship. “[M]y biggest goal for every client is that they don’t need me anymore. Empowering them to do what they need to do, and part of empowering them is... building their sense of self, building their self-esteem, examining those belief systems...” Erin shared an example of empowerment in women in recovery reclaiming their own belief systems. “Seventy percent of alcoholic women have had some trauma in their history, and a lot of that trauma has caused them to feel dirty and... feel like... it was their fault, and they feel like they don’t deserve any, anybody that’s healthy for them, and that affects them very greatly spiritually because, you know, they learn that God was a man, and they don’t trust men... so there’s no connection with God... [W]omen struggle in chemical-dependency treatment programs because they’re taught to say that they’re powerless, which is an ongoing theme in a lot of women’s lives, and now they’re taught to say they’re powerless again, and so I do a workshop... kind of redefining for women how they can be a part of the 12-step world but... do some redefining of what powerlessness is... so specifically for women, their spiritual journey in 12-step recovery is even harder sometimes because the God of their upbringing was, you know, this scary man who would do horrible things to them, and they associated that with their alcoholic father, and they don’t want to believe in any God you’re talking about, so helping them to learn that they can kind of believe what they want is very empowering for them.”

Creativity

Creativity and the ability to think outside the box are also ways in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. In order to meet clients where they are and choose appropriate interventions, the women needed to be able to have flexibility and
openness to a variety of strategies, including use of metaphor, symbolism, imagery, stories, ritual, meditation, and reflection. China, Erin, and Rebecca spoke about their personal use of prayer for guidance in working with clients, as well as their support of clients’ use of prayer if this fits with their clients’ belief system. Ellen, Rebecca, Samantha Ann, Elfy, and Carmen reference using such creative strategies as visual arts, bibliotherapy, journaling, music and poetry. Elfy spoke about opening connections between spirituality and creativity in her use of writing with clients. “And to, um, and to write from a spiritual perspective about their life, and so I, I’ve used that with people and...it’s a good first step to get them to start thinking about who they are as spiritual people and the connection between that and art and literature and movies and... you can open your mind up in lots of different ways to start thinking about these things, that it’s not just thinking about God and who God is, or, you know, who Buddha is, or, you know, if you’re an atheist, if you’re an agnostic or whatever, but it’s just, just thinking about the connections between the creative world and spirituality.” Elfy also shared examples of thinking outside of the box in her approach to therapy, stating “…because…the therapy I do is more in depth, I do like to see how people communicate in written form, so, you know, sometimes I’ll just ask clients to…write about whatever it is that they’re thinking, and then we can talk about the writing because I believe we have different voices with the writing and the verbal expression, and then there’s the therapy that happens over the telephone, which is very different. Clients are usually in their own home, or they’re in an environment that they feel comfortable in, and it just brings something new to the therapeutic process…and then the other, the other way is, is by walking, and so walking outside, of course, you know, spirituality is there without having to talk about it, it’s just
there, whether the day is, you know, really, really sunny or whether it’s cold or whatever, it’s just, it’s ever present.”

Samantha Ann shared an example of use of imagery in her work with a client.

“...there was one time he came in and I remember he was crying, and I remember he was talking about he just wanted to be held... he just wanted to know that he was okay. And I remember at the time my experience was you know, I could go over and put my arm around him and hold him, but I couldn’t...It was that in that moment it was something that he had to do on his own, and again, that was just one of those times where that, that was coming to me, and it was, it was sort of in opposition to everything that I was sort of feeling some natural thing to do, but it was, and working with him on, it felt to me more, and I, I used it as an analogy, but I said, “it feels to me more that what you’re looking for are, are the wings of an angel to wrap around you, you know, that it’s, that it’s God that you’re afraid isn’t going to hug you.” And so he used that imagery then; we used that a lot, the wings of an angel, and he would, he would use that in some imagery work we were doing to allow himself to be wrapped and be held by the wings of an angel. And... he did some good work... we were using the imagery, you know, of the wings being out, hearing the wings, the sound of the wings, feeling the wings as they came around him and embraced him.”

Ellen shared an example of a client’s use of symbolism and metaphor in their connection with each other. Ellen had a client, an international student from Africa, who found comfort in gardening during their work together. Ellen explained, “...before she left, before she went back to Africa, she had one of the communal gardens...and she brought in...I’m thinking it was a root, some kind of rooted plant that she brought in...
and she said for her that represented the growth for her and the, that I was with her through some of this growth process, and she would talk about her garden and how that was really healing for her, so I just feel like, you know, there was that connection, that earthiness and that, you know, growth, even that biological stuff that I feel is spiritual for me.” The client’s gift and Ellen’s understanding of it illustrate spirituality as connection to nature, connection within the relationship, and growth through these connections. Samantha Ann also drew upon symbolism and metaphor related to a client’s connection to nature. “With the one client… the nature connection for her, we could use then analogies from nature, you know, in the work that we were doing, or we could use nature prompts for her and sort of securities… how she could bring that spiritual sense present with her, you know. One time she was carrying leaves in her pocket, and it allowed her to go into a store and get some things and come out without having a panic attack because she had the leaves in her pocket, and it was like carrying a piece of God with her in her pocket, you know. So we might start out, you know, with something symbolic or metaphoric and then kind of move to the point of knowing that she didn’t need to have anything with her…” 

Spirituality was also present in the use of ritual. Rebecca shared the following example. “I have a client who’s working on… some sexual abuse by her father when she was very, very young. She does it all, it’s all, pretty much all in body memories, when she just starts to shake, and, [you know, it’s] such a metaphor. I use that blanket at the end of her, her therapy. It started with, she, the first time she worked, I didn’t have that blanket, I had a shawl on my door, and she said she was cold, and I said, “would you like something to wrap around you?” And I gave her that shawl. And then someone gave me
that blanket, and I decided to keep it here, so I put it around her, and it's like a healing
blanket. It's like healing energy, and she just uses that to calm herself and heal herself
and take that energy from it, so it would be...more of a ritual. Ritual's part of this too. I
think helping people develop rituals for the processes that they're in is also part of
spirituality, and helping them look at their own rituals of what they're doing. If it's
around grief, what rituals they need, if it's around healing, what rituals they need...”
Carmen also spoke about women's use of ritual and its connection to spirituality and self-care. “I think that ritual is part of spirituality and that women are good at ritual and that
many times we, when we're talking I, I often ask the question, “and what have you done
for yourself this week?” Because we're all giving, giving, giving [laughs]. So what have
you done for yourself this week, and it often is things like, ‘oh, you know, I, I took a nice,
warm bath and I lit a couple candles,’ or ‘I did some aromatherapy’... and it's ritualistic
kinds of things that they're doing to soothe themselves. ‘I meditated,’... Sometimes it's
even something like, ‘I took a long walk.’ A lot of connection with nature or with
animals, you know; I sense this a lot with women as a way of soothing or helping
themselves through issues is that they form bonds with lots of things, not just people.
And in that forming of those bonds they can find ways to then have little rituals that they
create. One woman, to this day, at...an anniversary time of a significant loss, always has
a ritual that she does, and it just helps her get through what she knows will be an
unpleasant time. So that kind of thing I think is amazing, but I see women as being more
in touch in that regard.”

Elfy also shared that spirituality appears in her work as a therapist through ritual.
“...[T]he most significant thing that I have in my office about...ways in which
spirituality appears in the work that I do is that when clients first come in...I ask them if they wouldn’t mind lighting the candle that I have, and I always have a new candle waiting to be lit, and then I talk to them about...what is the symbol of lighting the candle for them, and what are they trying to bring into the room with us as we, you know, continue our therapeutic dialogue, and it’s really interesting the types of things that they come up with.” When asked how clients responded to this ritual, Elfy explained, “...the first time that they’re doing it...depending on who the client is, it can be awkward for the client because...I have no idea who they are as a spiritual being, and even if that’s something they ever reflect on or if that’s something that they even want to reflect on. But...I’ve never had a client say that they don’t want to do it. I have asked clients, or clients have asked me if, if I would light it with them, and some clients, you know, take the light and, and bring it up to their face. Other clients just, you know, sit in the silence for a while, which is, you know, just something that I think we don’t do often enough in our society, and so I think they get a sense of what it is that I’m trying to encourage them to do. I’ve never actually had a, a client pray, but, out loud, but...there have been clients who have, you know, bowed their heads or closed their eyes or something like that, so yeah, they seem to be fairly receptive to it.”

The women also supported and encouraged clients accessing spirituality outside of the counseling session in a way that fit for the client. Ann spoke about sharing information with students about resources within the community. “...[S]ome students don’t have activities or what to get involved with. Sometimes students of color aren’t familiar with the community, and I have information about that. There are students that frequently are talking about their sexual orientation, and in [this region of the state] a lot
of them bring up religion...And so I will give, um, information about, you know, who are some safe people or a church that they might worship at, you know, to explore or to talk with someone...so in those ways I will provide information.” Erin shared the following example. “I do a lot of cognitive-behavioral stuff with my clients, and when you talk about identifying underlying beliefs and positive self-talk, and a lot of people will say, ‘well the way I do self-talk is I pray and I ask God to, you know, do this and do that,’ so it’s...often a part, I think, of cognitive-behavioral therapy because when you’re talking about self-messages and self-talk, and...what do you say to yourself sometimes on a daily basis that can motivate you or help you feel better, and a lot of people will say, ‘well, you know, I do that in the form of prayer,’ so I think that that’s often a piece that I would encourage people to bring in outside.” Frances shared that she often finds herself encouraging clients to think about how they use their energy in the world. “[I]t’s that split-second issue of where am I losing my energy, and where am I los-, losing my power, and I talk to my students about that a lot. And I will ask them to tell me...in what situation, in what circumstance did, did you lose your power, did you lose your energy, where did your energy, your energy go when you did this, when you thought that, and then ask them to do the opposite and ta-, talk to me about where their energy is, how are they breathing, how are they feeling...I mean, there are so many ways you can lose your energy in a split second, you know, like road rage, for inst-, instance...And that’s just toxic, and that’s a loss of energy, you know, if you were just approaching it...just a little differently, you know, you don’t have to, like, think nice thoughts. But at least pay attention to the fact that your butt is clenching and you’re squeezing the wheel, and... you could have used that energy to maybe write another page or two of your paper kind
of thing... I do have students that... have been pretty hands off with their life, reluctant to, you know, make a call or be you know, reactive instead of proactive, that are really turned around because when they can, I feel like when they can check their energy and see that it takes, you know, a split second to do that... when they're feeling fearful or apprehensive, I think they do that and can move... And I'm always talking about movement, have some movement, what's going to give you movement... and those, I think, are all spiritual kinds of things.”

Making Meaning

The women also viewed making meaning as a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. The women noted that spirituality seems to naturally connect with trying to make sense of the world. Ann commented, “...to me spirituality, ... just automatically fits into... a person trying to make sense of their world, and having a set of guiding principles or a set of belief systems...” The women talked about helping clients to examine existential questions and issues, including how one makes sense of the world and themselves within the world, and finds purpose and meaning in life. Carmen stated, “I think the whole world is asking questions about this right now. I have clients who are asking questions about what is it all about. We can’t, ever since 9/11 anyway, look at things in the same way, and a lot of people fear that we’re really maybe at the end of time... and so to help with that means you, you tap into belief systems and into spirituality and into how do you go on living.” Ellen also remarked that spirituality is present in the counseling process in grappling with questions about the meaning of life, loss, and attachment. Likewise, they also helped clients to examine their belief systems and find meaning in the life events they are confronting. Erin spoke about helping clients to
explore their own belief systems. "...[J]ust hearing someone say, 'you know what, you really don’t have to believe that,' is like, 'I don’t? But I’ll go to hell.' I mean...these are true discussions...And when...I start doing some of that ‘let’s examine some of these underlying beliefs, and let’s start to challenge some of them, and let’s start to, you know, recreate some self messages for yourself,’ they start to learn that, you know what, they don’t have to be that person anymore. And that’s, I think, very eye-opening for them, and it takes a long time to undo the damage...So I think even doing some very concrete cognitive-behavioral stuff can end up being very spiritual because you’re really looking at what do you believe about yourself, who created these belief systems, how can we challenge those. You’re kind of creating a whole new person for them, and sometimes the religious stuff comes up because a lot of times people are stuck in a...because of a very strict upbringing that has kept them there, especially alcoholics and addicts, especially women who are abused.”

Ellen spoke about the process of clients making meaning out of their experiences. "I think a lot of what clients might feel is that process of making meaning out of their experiences and...that kind of understanding...I’m thinking of it from a narrative perspective; it’s really about...spirituality as metaphor, you know, like, what’s the bigger meaning here. What’s the deeper meaning?” Likewise, Rebecca shared, “I think, just the concept of spirituality in the broadest sense, and that part of my clinical work is with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and it’s really hard, I think, to work with the horrendous things that human beings can do to other human beings without having some larger sense of how to make meaning of that, and for me spirituality is about how you
make meaning, what’s purpose, what’s a connection. Those are sort of the three big
ccepts for me.”

In making sense of things, the women also help clients struggle with complexity,
learning that they, as Ann commented, “...can hold two things true at the same time and
still be okay with that.” For example, it can be true that a parent has done something
hurtful to a child, while it can also be true at the same time that the parent loves the child
and is trying to do their best. Likewise, part of making meaning also includes being able
to consider different perspectives. China talked about this using a metaphor of a
kaleidoscope. “...It’s like the client comes in and they’re looking in the kaleidoscope
and they see their life and they keep looking and they see the same picture. And I think
therapy’s a chance to kind of help them turn it and look in at the same stuff but see it
differently. Or to provide a way that I’m seeing it differently than they are, well, what do
they think about that? I think faith provides a way to kind of turn the lens a little bit.
And look at it a little bit differently.” Making meaning can then serve to help instill a
sense of hope and empowerment and can lead to personal transformation and growth.

Strength

The women identified that spirituality can help clients to access their strengths.
Ann stated, “I always wonder, well, where do they get their strength from, if they don’t
know where it comes from...what makes them get up every day...I always find that
fascinating, you know, because... When I work with someone I always do try to find,
where, where is their strength,...what do they have going for themselves, what’s
working, when somebody’s life is all messed up, what is working, and how do they get
that working and where that comes from, and I think spirituality helps maybe access that,
you know, what do you find good in yourself...just to kind of tap into....” Likewise, spirituality itself can serve as a source of strength and coping. Carmen talked about recognizing spirituality as a source of strength her client utilized. “And so she came in, and as usual I asked about the religion in my very first time I talked, or spirituality, and she was very strong in her faith and was very seemingly comfortable with it and felt like it had been getting her through a lot of problems, a lot of things that she just was turning to her, her religion to give her some strength.” Carmen also spoke about the concept of spirituality contributing to the counseling process as a source of strength. “I think that all of us have strengths and we all have areas of weakness, and that usually our own sense of spirituality is a strength. Sometimes it gets twisted or misinterpreted and we need to figure it out, and that’s part of the counseling process....” China shared a similar perspective. “I personally see faith and spirituality as a source of strength and... that people can use it in a coping, positive kind of way, so I think that there's a way that you can use that as a therapist to kind of help you out.” She shared an example of how she talks with clients about accessing their spirituality as a source of strength. “[S]ometimes I'll say to people, um, ok, we're winding up today, and you're really in a lot of pain and you really kind of honored me by letting me see that pain. But the deal is now you've got to go out there and you've got to live for a week, and I'm wondering how might your faith help you this week....I think your faith is a source of strength. And you're not trusting yourself a whole lot right now. How might you be able to trust your higher power or your version of God? Or your... and really try to use the language that they would use with me...I'm very aware of, there's no way in 50 minutes a week that I'm naive enough to think that's going to change their lives. A lot of what needs to happen is they need to be
able to take this, and make changes out there in their lives. And my hope is there is going to be something that's going to be with them throughout the whole course of their lives. So if they can learn how to use their faith as a source of coping and strength. I mean, I believe if I'm doing my job, eventually I get fired.”

Hope

Samantha Ann and Ann both draw connections between strength and hope. Samantha Ann stated, “But it often opens up just this whole... strength area that many times clients have not recognized that they have, and I think that’s what fosters the hope, and I think you have to have hope really to make progress...and it helps give them meaning sometimes to things, and without that meaning it’s much easier to feel powerless and hopeless and so I think it’s very important. But certainly there are some people who do not have it, do not hope to have it at all, and that’s fine, but it still is going to be present on my side, and we just find other ways to define what the meaning of hope is for them.” Likewise, Ann shared, “...it’s easier to help clients, um, rebuild when they have someplace to begin, and, and like you said, maybe I, you call it hope, I call it their strength. Where...do they begin? Where’s their strength, where’s it, where does it lie, you know, who holds that power...?” Thus, getting in touch and accessing strength areas can then help to foster hope.

In discussing hope, Carmen shared an example of instilling hope, a factor that she views as necessary in therapy. “Okay, so one of the things that I do, and I do consistently with my clients, is assure them. I do a lot of nurturing assurance about while this, what we’re doing and this process is new and it feels different to you, and it feels weird and strange, and it’s easy to fall back into your old patterns, I want you to know that when
people follow these kinds of new ways of being that they feel less anxious. What I’m instilling by this kind of talk is hope, hope that things will be different, hope that things will change, hope that I can do it. And I think hope is an absolute necessary ingredient in therapy.” Erin shared her experience of hope existing in feeling heard and in experiencing connection. “...I have several times been able to...say things like, ‘yeah, I’m not going anywhere, I’m, you know, I’m right here...’ and as soon as they’re just able to sort of just get through their story they almost feel more hopeful, that, okay, at least now I’m not alone, at least now somebody else has heard it all, they haven’t judged me, they don’t think I’m crazy, they’re not going anywhere, so now I’m going to come back. And just that connection, just being able to feel heard, I think is part of the hope, part of that, and perhaps it has to be more of an indirect development of who they are spiritually through that, through just connecting with a therapist. That’s why I’m a firm believer in group therapy...Because I think that even happens in more powerful ways when there’s other clients experiencing the same thing, and I think you can kind of go back to Yalom, where that whole universality, that ability to feel like you’re not alone, I think that’s the key piece in feeling hopeful is feeling not alone.” Frances spoke about hope being present in being connected to something larger. “[T]here is a, an, an aspect of not really understanding just how small you are in the universe and in understanding how connected you are, you know, that there’s all these gajillion pieces and people and things and...nature and energy and forces...I think hope requires that you...become that, you know. You don’t go about striving, trying to make things happen, and, you know, that’s when you feel like you can’t...your little piece of something in the universe, um, that it’s not in your hands...So that’s...where you turn...to hope...I think hope is turning it over...
to a force that’s bigger than yourself and part of yourself...understanding that when
you’re a part of something big, then you’re big too...Because... it’s that connectedness,
it’s that interrelation, and...there’s just this kind of force that we’re all part of, and it’s
very big, and therefore you are too kind of thing.”

Samantha Ann spoke about hope in transcending pain. “Because of... that trust
that um, that there is some meaning. There is some purpose for things, or that you can
make it. I mean I’ve never believed or, or tried to, umm, have clients uh believe that, you
know, oh you’re meant to go through this suffering for, um some more higher illustrious
power...You know, inside or whatever, as in “God’s doing it to you.” Um, but what I do
say, and try to help them recognize is ...this is an opportunity that they have to find the
strength within them, and trust in that more.... and find that connectedness where they
have felt isolated, and trust in that more. And...that’s the hope I think...that they can
find a way to convert the pain, not just to heal but to um, convert the pain into... a way of
seeing the strength that they have, a way of seeing the creativity that they have, and to be
able to use that, um, to develop even more compassion, not just for themselves, but for
others in the world. And that this is their opportunity...and for me that is a part of
hope...not just ‘I’m going to get better,’ but, ‘I’m going to benefit from this in some way,
and others are going to benefit from it.’ ...And that opportunity is there.”

Collective Story of Women Therapists and Spirituality

The collective story of women therapists and spirituality in the counseling process
is shared in the paragraphs below. The collective story provides another way to
understand the ideas presented in the themes. The goal of phenomenological research is
to convey the essence of an experience, and it is the collective story that represents the
essence of women therapists' experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. This story was reviewed by the participants, who each provided feedback that it was inclusive of them and resonated with them.

These women therapists, whether coming from an upbringing within a religious tradition or from a background in which spirituality was not a central focus within family of origin, all engaged in a personal spiritual journey which included exploring their own beliefs. This spiritual journey and exploration included examining different religions and belief systems outside of religion, being curious and asking questions about one's sense of self and purpose in life, and making intentional and conscious decisions to cultivate a personal sense of spirituality. This often included deciding to devote energy towards embracing those aspects that were spiritually nourishing. The women described their spiritual journeys as including finding a sense of self and establishing a connection with a greater power outside of self, highlighting this personal connection rather than religious dogma. The women also commented on personal spiritual growth outside of session and experiences in therapy impacting each other. They shared that as their sense of spirituality grew, it also grew in their practice. Likewise, in hearing difficult stories and learning to hold the client's pain as a therapist, the women also experienced the opportunity for self-examination and greater understanding of their own belief systems. In a similar vein, the women also spoke about learning and growing from their clients and experiences in the therapy relationship. The women acknowledged that both they and their clients are impacted by the therapeutic relationship.

The women in this study experienced their identities as women, spiritual people and therapists as interconnected and integrated. One of the women talked about all of
these aspects of her identity being present, but some moving more to the forefront or being more salient depending on the situation. The women described their identities as being intertwined and blended together, difficult to separate out and core to how they view their work as therapists. When asked specifically to talk about themselves as women, they identified being nurturing as part of being a woman, therapist and spiritual. For some women, the integration of their many identities is particularly powerful. One woman spoke of claiming and living her multiple oppressed identities, with her very existence in the world making a powerful spiritual statement. Other women who at first were not permitted to embrace spirituality in their work as therapists spoke about the power of reclaiming, integrating, and living out their various dimensions of identity, being able to truly bring their whole person into the counseling process.

For the women in this study, spirituality was ever present, and they consequently viewed it as being present in the counseling process, even at times when they were not consciously aware of it or talking about it directly. One woman described spirituality as a way of life, and another described spirituality as underlying everything, just as much a part of people as emotions and intellect. Thus, many of the women recognized spirituality as a vital part of the counseling process and as a foundation for themselves. One of the women described counseling as a spiritual process, commenting on the ancient aspect of sharing feelings and laying down burdens.

In discussing spirituality, the women also highlighted diversity. Specifically, the women acknowledged spirituality as a dimension of human experience that intersects with other dimensions of identity, and for some is an aspect of self that also serves to integrate these dimensions of identity. The women embraced a broad, inclusive view of
spirituality, honoring that there are many different spiritual paths. They also commented on spirituality being unique to every person and recognized the importance of not imposing one's own sense of spirituality on clients. To that end, the women made efforts to ask each client about experiences with spirituality and faith, to gain an understanding of the client's cultural context, and to be open to drawing upon the client's sense of spirituality as a potential coping resource.

Although articulating it in a variety of ways, the women experienced spirituality within the counseling process as something larger than self. They described it as something beyond what we as humans know or understand but can access, a presence or force that is working. They talked about depending on a power greater than themselves, recognizing that they are not in charge, surrendering to this power for guidance. They spoke of it as a power greater than counselor and client, perhaps something larger co-created between them, and allowing that power to work in the counseling process. The women also described spirituality within the counseling process as trusting that things are happening for a reason and believing that they are connected to certain clients for a reason, brought together by something larger. In talking about being open to this sense of something larger at work, several women described being a conduit or vessel and drawing on greater wisdom and healing energy. The women also experienced spirituality as the power of people helping each other and a sense of interconnectedness.

All of the women experienced spirituality in the counseling process as connection. The women emphasized connection with the larger community, interconnectedness with all living things, whether through church, nature, or bonding with animals, feeling connected to a greater whole. They expressed a hope that clients leave therapy feeling a
greater sense of connectedness with others and knowing that they are not alone.
Likewise, the connection between the client and therapist within the counseling process
was highlighted. The women described relationships as a place where spirituality exists,
and they emphasized the therapeutic alliance, joining with, connecting to, and
understanding the client as vital. One woman talked about working with a suicidal client
and the importance of connection, as it allows the client to connect to something other
than their pain and can then be the pathway to cultivating hope. The women also
recognized that the connection in the therapy relationship can lead to building trust,
which consequently can help to move therapy to a deeper level in exploring the inner self.
Thus, connection serves as a powerful foundation in the counseling process. It is the
connection that leads to healing, and it is spirituality that takes the therapy relationship to
a different depth, a deeper connection. A sense of safety, acceptance and non-judgment,
compassion, validation, and the experience of being heard and understood were elements
the women discussed in relation to connection within the therapy relationship.

Another way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process is by being
present to the client. The women emphasized the importance of staying in the present,
being spiritually grounded in order to do so, and being genuine and authentic within the
therapy relationship. They commented on needing to be present in order to connect with
and understand the client and spoke about being still and being there with the client,
rather than jumping ahead or focusing on where to go next. Being in the present also
includes awareness of the client’s context, working with who they are in the world and
where they are developmentally in their own process. It follows then, that meeting the
client where they are is also a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process.

The women talked about honoring the client’s way of being in the world, joining them where they are, and attending to their needs. This includes learning about the client’s spiritual beliefs and using language and interventions that will make sense for the client, recognizing the importance of taking into account how the client heals and learns, understanding who they are as a whole person with multiple dimensions of identity and experience, and empowering the client. Creativity and the ability to think outside the box are also ways in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. In order to meet clients where they are and choose appropriate interventions, the women needed to be able to have flexibility and openness to a variety of strategies, including use of metaphor, symbolism, imagery, stories, ritual, meditation, reflection, and prayer.

The women also viewed making meaning as a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. The women noted that spirituality seems to naturally connect with trying to make sense of one’s world and establishing a belief system or set of principles. The women talked about helping clients to examine existential questions and issues, including how one makes sense of the world and themselves within the world, and finds purpose and meaning in life. Likewise, they also helped clients to examine their belief systems and find meaning in the life events they are confronting. In making sense of things, the women also helped clients struggle with complexity, teaching clients that they do not have to confine themselves to dichotomous thinking and can instead hold several things true at the same time. Likewise, part of making meaning also includes being able to consider different perspectives. One woman used the metaphor of a
kaleidoscope to describe how therapy can provide a way for a client to view their life differently, with faith helping to turn the lens of the kaleidoscope so that multiple perspectives can be considered. Making meaning can then serve to help instill a sense of hope and empowerment and can lead to personal transformation and growth.

Trust also emerged as a way in which spirituality is present in the counseling process. The women talked about the importance of establishing trust in the therapy relationship, as well as trusting the therapy process. Additionally, the women identified spirituality as being present in their trust of the client’s process and the client’s inner wisdom. Likewise, the women talked about trusting themselves and their own inner wisdom or intuition. They spoke about teaching clients to trust themselves and rely on their strengths, trusting the strengths and resources in the client and in themselves as therapists. The women identified that spirituality can help clients to access their strengths and spirituality itself can serve as a source of strength and coping. Getting in touch and accessing strength areas can then help to foster hope. Likewise, spirituality serves as a source of strength and a resource in the women’s self-care, helping them in holding the client’s pain and hearing difficult stories.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the results will be discussed in the context of the primary research questions guiding this study. These questions are: How do women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process? How does the spirituality of these women appear in the work that they do as therapists? How does spirituality contribute to the counseling process? Although each question is presented individually, there is considerable overlap, similar to the interconnection and overlapping of themes presented in the previous chapter. After these questions are addressed, implications for counseling practice and research, as well as limitations of this study, are discussed.

How Do Women Therapists Experience Spirituality in the Counseling Process?

This first research question focuses on understanding how women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process. For the women in this study, connection was central in their experience of spirituality in the counseling process. This included connection between the client and therapist within the counseling process, as well as connection with the larger community, interconnectedness with all living things, whether through church, nature, or bonding with animals, and feeling connected to a larger whole. The sacredness of relationship and the role of connection to others is also a theme present in existing stories and research about women and spirituality (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Borysenko, 1999; Och, 2003; Plaskow & Christ, 1989). The findings of this study provide empirical evidence supporting the idea of relationship as sacred and connection to others as vital in women’s spiritual experiences and growth. Miller and Stiver (1997), in focusing on a relational approach to therapy, emphasize a healing,
collaborative relationship in which connection is growth fostering, empathic, and empowering. For the women in this study, spirituality allowed the therapy relationship to move to a greater depth and deeper connection, and this connection, in turn, led to healing. In considering the findings of this study, connection serves as a foundation, with other aspects of spirituality in the counseling process seeming to arise out of connection. Connection within the therapy relationship could then serve as the basis for the processes of building trust, instilling hope, and engaging in meaning-making.

The women in this study also identified trust as a way in which they experienced spirituality in the counseling process. Trust between counselor and client grew from the connection established in the therapy relationship. The women spoke about trust within this relationship, as well as trusting self, trusting the client's process, and trusting the therapy process. The women drew upon spirituality in honoring vulnerability, trusting their intuition and the inner wisdom of both self and the client, and trusting the unfolding of the larger process.

Within the counseling process, the women in this study experienced spirituality as something larger than self. They spoke about it in a variety of ways, acknowledging that there is an aspect to it that is beyond what we as humans can fully understand. Some women spoke about depending upon a power greater than themselves to which they could surrender, recognizing that they are not in charge. They also spoke about the power of people helping each other and a sense of interconnectedness. One beautiful description was experiencing spirituality in the counseling process as a world that is co-created between the therapist and the client, with the whole being greater than the sum of the two individuals in the room. This again emphasizes the role of connection in spirituality. This
also supports taking a relational approach to therapy, as well as using such modalities as groupwork, in which the group process itself functions as something larger than self and as a world co-created by its members in which they can draw upon the healing power of interconnection and providing mutual assistance, witnessing, and affirmation to each other. In a similar way, the women in this study also experienced spirituality in the counseling process in trusting that things are happening for a reason, including believing that they are connected to certain clients for a reason and are brought together by something larger. Rather than attributing such things to coincidence, this perspective points to the depth with which therapists can experience the therapy relationship and honor the sacredness of their connection within the relationship, as well as allowing that they do not need to have all the answers or immediate clarity of understanding but instead need to trust in the process unfolding. This perspective can provide a sense of grounding and source of hope for therapists when struggling with difficult clinical situations.

The findings of this study indicate that women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process in making meaning, with spirituality and making sense of the world fitting together. This provides empirical support for the conceptualization of finding meaning and purpose in life as both part of therapy and part of spirituality (Aponte, 2002; Corey, 2001; Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Jankowki, 2002; Perlstein, 2001; Weiner, 2001). The findings of this study tie the process of making meaning of life experiences to instilling and fostering hope, as well as a sense of empowerment, which can then lead to healing and growth.

For the women in this study, spirituality was experienced as ever present. Even if spirituality was not discussed in content or part of the client’s identity, spirituality was
still present in the room through the therapist. Specifically, the women did not impose their sense of spirituality on clients in such situations, but rather drew upon their spirituality as a resource, support, and integral aspect of their being in their role as a therapist. Although spirituality is experienced by the women in this study as ever present, they also shared experiences in which they intentionally invited and actively used spirituality in the counseling process. For example, the women invited spirituality into the counseling process in the form of ritual. Perlstein (2001) spoke of ritual co-created within the therapy relationship as serving to empower the client, connect with others, help the client in holding their own pain, and help the client honor and accept self. They also used creative strategies including metaphor, symbolism, imagery, stories, ritual, meditation, and reflection. When consistent with the client’s belief systems, the women actively supported the client’s efforts at praying and meditating, seeking community and support through church, and other ways of using their faith as a resource and source of strength. Thus, spirituality can be experienced as present in the room as a part of the therapist’s being, as well as actively invited into the counseling process as a strength to be drawn upon in healing and growth.

How Does the Spirituality of These Women Appear in the Work that They Do as Therapists?

This second research question addresses the ways in which the spirituality of the women therapists appears in their work as therapists. Consistently for the women, their sense of spirituality was a core aspect of their identity that was integrated into who they are, spreading across all other dimensions of their identities. Thus, spirituality appeared in the very being of these women. Just as they entered the therapy room as women and therapists, so too did they enter the room as spiritual people. In addition, the women also
spoke about other salient dimensions of their identities, including race and sexual orientation. For these women, spirituality served as a way to develop an integrated identity. Spirituality encompassed each dimension of their identities, as women, and therapists, as well as African-American, Native-American, and lesbian for some of the women. Spirituality helped to integrate these multiple dimensions of identity, allowing each dimension to inform the other. Through embracing their integrated identities, spirituality could serve as a resource and foundation for the women, relying on spirituality in trusting themselves as therapist and the therapy process, relying on something larger than self to help ground them in the present moment, and drawing upon spirituality to help hold the client’s pain and in their own self-care.

Consistent with the therapists’ own sense of being people with multiple, inseparable dimensions of identity, was their application of this same understanding in their work with clients. They made efforts to be aware of their own spiritual journeys and perspectives, which is vital since the therapist’s spiritual beliefs impact how she approaches therapy and the actual therapy process itself (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Jankowski, 2002; Linnenberg, 1997; Rivett & Street, 2001, West, 1998). The women also made efforts to cultivate an understanding of the client’s worldview and sense of spirituality. This awareness of and being present to self and client, as well as awareness of how therapist and client worldviews impact each other in the therapy relationship, served to help the women avoid imposing their own spiritual beliefs and instead honor the client’s sense of spirituality and way of being. Addressing multiple dimensions of identity and attending to personal worldviews in self and client is consistent with feminist therapy (Cammaert &

The spirituality of these women appeared in their work as therapists through their efforts to join the client and honor their way of being, as well as through their focus on the whole person. The women tended to the whole person through their recognition of each client’s multiple dimensions of identity and the various dimensions of human experience, including physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Choosing interventions that address the whole person and meet the client where they are was accomplished by flexibility and openness to thinking outside the box and use of creative strategies. An example of this is recognizing imagery as effective for one client, while use of music or writing may best meet a different client’s needs. This attention to the whole person is consistent with the theme of striving for wholeness that is present in existing stories of women and spirituality (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Christ, 1980).

The findings of this study related to joining the client and honoring their way of being, attending to the whole person, and attending to personal worldviews and multiple dimensions of identity in self and in clients adds evidence to the importance of drawing upon and integrating multicultural competencies in practice and to the conceptualization of spirituality as an aspect of multiculturalism and diversity.

How Does Spirituality Contribute to the Counseling Process?

The third research question addressed the broader idea of understanding how spirituality contributes to the counseling process. The women in this study talked about spirituality contributing to the counseling process in making meaning, serving as a source
of strength, and instilling hope, with each of these ideas flowing into each other. The idea of spirituality as a source of support and strength, as well as a meaning making process, is present in literature (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Cornett, 1998; Perlstein, 2001; Weiner, 2001), and has been supported by data from this study. Spirituality can assist clients in accessing their strengths and can serve as a strength itself, which can then provide hope to the client.

Likewise, making meaning of things can also help foster hope and lead to empowerment. The women spoke about the process of meaning making, as well as examining power dynamics within the therapy relationship, cultivating awareness of how power has been depicted and employed in religion, and helping to empower the client in their work together. Weiner (2001) commented on the disconnection from spirituality that women can experience, often when brought up in a patriarchal religion of origin. Weiner emphasized personal meaning making, through examining what the client has been taught about spirituality and existential issues, with the focus on empowering the client. Similarly, the women in this study worked with clients to explore their belief systems, at times even challenging oppressive messages, to reclaim a sense of spirituality that was empowering. This process of making meaning and reclaiming an empowering sense of spirituality could then help clients access their spirituality as a source of strength, rather than as a source of oppression or shame, as well as help to foster hope.

Just as spirituality contributes to the counseling process in serving as a source of strength for clients, so too can it serve as a source of strength for the therapist. The women spoke about spirituality as a resource in helping them to be present to the client and to hold their pain. In his discussion of therapy as a spiritual process, Cornett (1998)
highlighted the importance of the therapist being present to the client as a witness and support. The findings of this study expand on this idea. For the women in this study, staying present to the client meant being spiritually grounded themselves. They were present to the client in being genuine and authentic within the therapy relationship, being aware of the client's context, as well as empowering the client to share what is most present to them and then allowing the process to unfold. When hearing difficult stories and witnessing the client's emotions, the women drew on their own foundation of spirituality, trusting in something larger than themselves working within the therapy process. They were able to access spirituality to help them be present to the client's pain and respond with compassion and intention. This provides evidence for the concept of therapists using their own spiritual experiences to help them be open to and hold the client's pain (Anderson & Worthen, 1997). Spirituality also played a role in the women's self-care, helping them to take care of self so that they can be present to others. The women emphasized the importance of nourishing themselves spiritually in their self-care. They accomplished this through connection with others, connections with nature, being in the moment, working towards greater balance in life, and seeking out spiritually nurturing people and activities.

Implications for Counseling Practice

In this next section, implications for counseling practice will be discussed. Connection was a central theme that emerged in this study as a way in which spirituality was experienced in the counseling process. According to Miller and Stiver (1997), it is through mutually empathic and mutually empowering connections to others that we are able to grow. Fukuyama and Sevig (1999), recognized spirituality as an important part of
the connection within the counseling relationship. Empirical evidence for these ideas is provided through the foundation that connection within the therapy relationship provided for the women in this study, from which healing and growth could occur. Establishing a strong, collaborative therapy relationship, in which such factors as safety, acceptance, non-judgment, compassion, validation, and the experience of being heard and understood exist, is central to therapy. This is supported by the results of this study, as well as with what is commonly known in the field of counseling psychology as common factors research. Common factors are elements common across all theoretical orientations and therapeutic techniques that are associated with positive outcomes in therapy (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Lampropoulos, 2000; Wampold, 2000). Hubble, Duncan, and Miller (1999), identify relationship factors as one of the four major common factors. Relationship factors include therapist-provided variables, such as the core conditions of empathy, warmth, positive regard, and genuineness identified by Rogers in his person-centered approach, as well as the therapeutic alliance, which consists of both therapist and client contributions to the relationship (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Duncan, 2002; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Lambert & Barley, 2001). Relationship variables account for 30% of successful outcome variance (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Lambert & Barley, 2001). Thus, common factors research and the results of this study both support establishing connection within the therapy relationship. The therapy relationship can then serve as a foundation for approaching the client’s affect and providing a safe environment for holding the client’s pain. The results of this study provide support for therapeutic approaches and perspectives that emphasize the sacredness of the relationship between the therapist and client. Likewise, the results offer
suggestsions for how spirituality contributes to developing this depth of connection. It is spirituality that can be a resource in holding the client's pain, in building trust within the relationship, in trusting the therapy process and something larger than self at work, in remaining present to the client and joining and empathizing with the client, all of which contribute to depth of connection.

The importance of counselor self-awareness of one's multiple dimensions of identity and examination of personal spiritual beliefs is supported by the results of this study, in which each of the women engaged in their own spiritual journey, which included exploring and coming to understand their own sense of spirituality and recognizing that their various dimensions of identity are integrated and interconnected. Existing literature pertaining to spirituality and counseling process also emphasizes that the therapist examine and be aware of their personal spiritual perspective and worldview (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Aponte, 2002; Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Jankowski, 2002; Linnenberg, 1997; West, 1998). This is consistent with multicultural competencies calling for therapist awareness of their own dimensions of identity and worldview, as well as how this impacts the therapy relationship (APA, 2003; Arredondo, et al., 1996; Sue, et al., 1992). Likewise, these same competencies note that it is essential that the therapist understand the client's worldview, which can include the client's spiritual beliefs and experiences. The results of this study illustrate how in clinical practice this awareness of worldview of self and client can help the therapist avoid imposing their spiritual beliefs on the client, and the therapist can instead join with the client and honor their way of being in the world. Specific suggestions offered within the results include not only learning about the client's spiritual beliefs, but also using
language and interventions that will make sense for the client. For the women in the study, spirituality was present in their ability to take a creative approach to therapy and think outside the box. By being open to using creative intervention strategies in therapy, such as metaphor, imagery, and ritual, therapists can be flexible in meeting their client’s needs and finding interventions that are specific to the individual client. Likewise, attending to the whole person in therapy also connects with joining the client and honoring his or her way of being in the world. Tending to the whole person in therapy, a theme present in the results of this study, can be thought of in terms of multiple dimensions of identity, as well as the many aspects of human experience. Tending to the whole person includes recognizing that one’s multiple dimensions of identity are interconnected and impact each other, and recognizing the connection between the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of self.

The women in this study spoke about experiencing spirituality in the counseling process as something larger than self. In clinical practice this can translate to surrendering to this greater power for guidance, trusting the process, and recognizing the sacredness of the therapy process. The results of this study provide evidence supporting the conceptualization of therapy as a spiritual process, with an emphasis on the sacred nature of the therapy process and relationship, that is discussed in existing literature (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Cornett, 1998; Perlstein, 2001; West, 1998). This sense of something larger within the counseling process can also be seen in groupwork as the power of people helping each other and the sense of interconnectedness within the group. This also supports helping the client to connect with the larger community.
In clinical practice, spirituality can serve as a resource for therapist self-care and as a way to ground oneself so as to be more fully present to the client. Being present to the client corresponds with focusing on being, rather than doing or saying, in order to allow the client’s own process to unfold (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Cornett, 1998; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Perlstein, 2001; West, 1998). This study also provides empirical evidence for spirituality serving as a resource to therapists in holding the client’s pain, which is discussed in existing conceptual literature (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Cornett, 1998; Perlstein, 2001). Therapists can also help clients to draw on their own sense of spirituality in learning how to tolerate their own emotions and self-soothe.

In order to be able to draw upon spirituality as a resource, clients may first need assistance in reclaiming a sense of spirituality that is empowering for them. This entails examining power dynamics in the therapy relationship and in the client’s personal belief system. Weiner (2001) asserts that the integration of a belief system that is consistent with the client’s spiritual experiences and perspective and provides a framework for understanding her purpose in life and making sense of the world is central to the therapy process. In helping the client to create such a framework, it may be necessary to work with clients to deconstruct patriarchal and oppressive religious and/or societal messages as part of their meaning making process. Helping the client to struggle with complexity, explore different perspectives, and grapple with existential questions of purpose and meaning in life can lead to fostering hope and empowerment, as well as personal transformation, healing, and growth.

The ability to draw upon spirituality to assist clients in recognizing their strengths, as well as drawing upon spirituality as a strength in and of itself supports the role
spirituality can play when working from a strength-based perspective and building on resiliency. Likewise, spirituality can help to instill hope. Within the common factors research mentioned at the beginning of this section, hope is also one of the four common factors. This factor includes both the client's and therapist's hopeful expectations and their belief in the healing power of the treatment techniques or rituals (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Hubble, et al., 1999). As presented in the results, taking an approach to therapy that focuses on client strengths and the belief that the client is capable of change and growth can instill hope and create the expectation that healing can occur. By creating a sense of relational safety for the client, they can be empowered to make meaningful connections and try new ways of responding to situations or framing situations, all of which can offer hope for growth and positive change to both the client and therapist (Teyber, 2000). Miller and Stiver (1997) emphasize that people develop within connections or relationships with other people. The results of this study provide evidence for this emphasis on growth in connection. It follows then that experiencing a positive connection within the therapy relationship can lead to the hope that other growth-fostering and healing connections can be established outside of therapy.

Implications for Research

Implications for research will be discussed in this section. This study employed qualitative research methodology to explore women therapists' experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. The results of this study indicated that the women experienced spirituality in the counseling process and recognized spirituality as being able to contribute to the counseling process. As there has not been extensive research on spirituality as a process component in counseling, this study can serve as a starting point.
for further research in this area. As this study focused specifically on women therapists, further research on male therapists’ experiences of the counseling process is needed. Likewise, this study focused on the therapist’s perspective, so research about the client’s experience of spirituality in the counseling process is also needed. Based upon the women’s spiritual journeys and some of their stories of spirituality being a taboo topic in their training and only more recently becoming more widely accepted as a dimension to be addressed in therapy, it may be interesting to examine the differences between specific cohorts of therapists and their experiences of spirituality in their training and early and more recent clinical practice. The impact of experience level of the therapist may also be explored in longitudinal research that examines therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process as they develop more experience throughout their careers.

Further research that explores the use of specific spiritual interventions with clients with various presenting problems and the impact of these interventions on the therapy process may be valuable. The women in this study spoke about spirituality as being present in use of such interventions as metaphor, imagery, and ritual, and it would be interesting to learn more about how these interventions are experienced by therapist and client, as well as how these interventions are used with different presenting problems. Connection emerged as a core theme in how women therapists experienced spirituality in the counseling process, which points to further research focused specifically on spirituality and connection within the therapy relationship, from both the therapist’s and client’s perspectives.
Limitations

Limitations of this study include those limitations specific to phenomenological research. Since phenomenology focuses on themes and understanding in depth the overall essence of an experience across participants, specific and unique aspects of individual experiences are not highlighted. Within this study, by focusing on therapists' perspectives alone, clients' perspectives were not explored. As the therapy relationship includes both therapist and client, and both impact the counseling process, not having the clients' perspectives is a limitation. The women in this study came from different professional backgrounds, specifically social workers, counselors, and psychologists, and the differences in their training and work settings and how this might have impacted their perspectives on spirituality in the counseling process were not explored.

Participation in this study was limited geographically, so all participants currently reside in the Midwest region of the United States. Participants' primary work was providing individual therapy, with at least 7-8 individual client contact hours per week, and participants worked as therapists for at least three to five years or more. Thus, therapists who were less experienced or who focused on aspects other than individual therapy, such as consultation or training, were not included in this study. Participants were women who experience spirituality as important in therapy, attend to the spiritual dimension of counseling, and are comfortable focusing on how spirituality contributes to the counseling process rather than on religious beliefs or practices. This limits how well the findings of the study apply to therapists who do not experience spirituality as important in therapy or to therapists who focus on specific religious beliefs within their counseling practice. Consistent with phenomenological research, the findings of this...
study are best understood in the context of the nine participants in this study.
Considering the detailed descriptions of the participants may help in determining the transferability of the findings of this study to other settings and situations.

Additionally, while counseling process was the focus of this study, outcome was not addressed. Although this study contributes to understanding the role spirituality plays in counseling process, it has not addressed the impact that spirituality has on the outcome of counseling. This limits understanding as to whether or not drawing upon spirituality in the counseling process has any impact on the success of counseling. Likewise, this study is based upon self-report of the therapist and her experiences in the counseling process. While this provides an understanding of the therapist’s conceptualization of past experiences with spirituality in the counseling process, it does not allow for observing in the present moment the impact that spirituality may have on the counseling process.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

Announcement of Research Study
This is an invitation to participate in a research study designed to investigate women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. My name is Sharon Carney, and I am pursuing my doctoral degree in counseling psychology in the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University. This research study is part of my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson. I am seeking potential participants who identify as women and who are mental health professionals, including psychologists, counselors, and social workers. I am interested in interviewing women therapists who experience spirituality as important in therapy and who attend to the spiritual dimension of counseling. Although spirituality can be expressed in religious practices, I am interested in focusing on how spirituality contributes to the counseling process rather than on religious beliefs or practices.

Potential participants should spend a significant portion of their working hours providing individual therapy, at least 7-8 individual client contact hours per week, and ideally will have been working as therapists for at least three to five years or more. I am attempting to recruit women of majority and minority statuses (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation). Participation will involve being interviewed about your experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Multicultural competencies and guidelines acknowledge the importance of attending to gender and spirituality, along with other dimensions of diversity, in therapy, yet research about women and spirituality in the counseling process is much needed. By conducting this study, I hope to give voice to women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process and learn more about how the spirituality of therapists impacts the work that we do and how spirituality can be a source of support and empowerment in the therapy process.
If you are interested in learning more about participating in this study, please contact me by email (sharon.a.carney@wmich.edu) or phone (574-254-0359) to receive additional information. Also, please feel free to share this announcement with colleagues who you think might be interested in participating in this study. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sharon A. Carney
APPENDIX B

Script for Scheduling Initial Contact
The following script will be utilized by this researcher if potential participants contact the researcher via email to indicate interest in the study. This script will be emailed to the potential participant in order to facilitate scheduling of an initial contact by telephone.

Dear _________________________(fill in name of potential participant),

Thank you for expressing interest in my study investigating women therapists' experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. I would like to arrange a time to speak with you by phone for about 5-10 minutes to tell you more about my study and to see if you would like to participate. I would appreciate it if you could please email me with your telephone number and dates and times that would be convenient for me to call.

Thank you for your interest in this study. I will look forward to talking with you about it soon.

Sincerely,

Sharon Carney
APPENDIX C

Initial Contact Script for Potential Participants Recommended to the Researcher
The following script will be read to potential participants whose names were provided by professionals in the mental health field at the first telephone contact.

Hello. My name is Sharon Carney, and I am a student in Western Michigan University’s Counseling Psychology Doctoral Program. I am conducting a dissertation research study in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson. I was given your name as a potential participant by (fill in referring person’s name). I would like to invite you to participate in a study investigating women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. I am seeking participants who identify as women and who are mental health professionals, including psychologists, counselors, and social workers. I am interested in interviewing women therapists who experience spirituality as important in therapy and who attend to the spiritual dimension of counseling. Although spirituality can be expressed in religious practices, I am interested in focusing on how spirituality contributes to the counseling process rather than on religious beliefs or practices. I am looking for participants who spend a significant portion of their working hours providing individual therapy, at least 7-8 individual client contact hours per week, and ideally who have been working as therapists for at least three to five years or more. [Does this seem to fit for you so far? (If the individual says “yes,” continue with script. If “no,” then thank the individual for their time and ask them for names of people they know who may potentially be interested in participating in this study)].

I believe that this is an important area of research. Multicultural competencies and guidelines acknowledge the importance of attending to gender and spirituality, along with
other dimensions of diversity, in therapy, yet research about women and spirituality in the counseling process is much needed. By conducting this study, I hope to give voice to women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process and learn more about how the spirituality of therapists impacts the work that we do and how spirituality can be a source of support and empowerment in the therapy process.

Participation in the study involves two steps. The first step involves completing a demographic questionnaire, which should take about 10-15 minutes. This information will be used to select a diverse sample of participants. If you are selected from among those who agree to participate, you will be invited to participate in the second step of this study.

Step two of the study involves participating in two interviews, an initial face-to-face interview and a follow-up telephone interview. Interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient for you and will last between 1½ to 2 hours. In both interviews, you will be asked questions about your experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Both interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Initial interviews will be conducted in person. Follow-up interviews will be conducted by telephone approximately 6 months after the initial interviews. All of the information collected is confidential. Do you think this is a study in which you might be willing to participate? [If “yes,” proceed with script. If “no,” then thank the individual for their time and ask them for names of people they know who may potentially be interested in participating in this study].

I will mail to you a consent form to read in further considering whether or not you would be willing to participate in this study. The consent form describes this study in detail. Included in the consent form is my contact information so that you can reach me
should any questions arise once you read the consent form. I will also include the demographic questionnaire in this mailing. I will contact you within a week of your receiving these forms to see if you have any additional questions about the study. At that time you may also indicate whether you continue to be interested in being considered for participation in the interview part of this study. I will also ask you for names and contact information of other individuals who may be interested in participating in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this study.

If the individual would like to receive a consent form and demographic questionnaire, a mailing address will be obtained. The consent form and demographic questionnaire will be mailed and a follow-up phone call will be placed to the individual approximately one week after the forms have been mailed.
APPENDIX D

Initial Contact Script for Potential Participants Indicating Personal Interest
The following script will be read to potential participants who have contacted this researcher to express personal interest in this study at the first telephone contact.

Hello. My name is Sharon Carney, and I am a student in Western Michigan University’s Counseling Psychology Doctoral Program. I am contacting you because you expressed interest in participating in a research study on women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. I am conducting this dissertation research study in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree under the supervision of Dr. Mary Z. Anderson. I am seeking participants who identify as women and who are mental health professionals, including psychologists, counselors, and social workers. I am interested in interviewing women therapists who experience spirituality as important in therapy and who attend to the spiritual dimension of counseling. Although spirituality can be expressed in religious practices, I am interested in focusing on how spirituality contributes to the counseling process rather than on religious beliefs or practices. I am looking for participants who spend a significant portion of their working hours providing individual therapy, at least 7-8 individual client contact hours per week, and ideally who have been working as therapists for at least three to five years or more. [Does this seem to fit for you so far? (If the individual says “yes,” continue with script. If “no,” then thank the individual for their time and ask them for names of people they know who may potentially be interested in participating in this study)].

I believe that this is an important area of research. Multicultural competencies and guidelines acknowledge the importance of attending to gender and spirituality, along with other dimensions of diversity, in therapy, yet research about women and spirituality in the
counseling process is much needed. By conducting this study, I hope to give voice to women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process and learn more about how the spirituality of therapists impacts the work that we do and how spirituality can be a source of support and empowerment in the therapy process.

Participation in the study involves two steps. The first step involves completing a demographic questionnaire, which should take about 10-15 minutes. This information will be used to select a diverse sample of participants. If you are selected from among those who agree to participate, you will be invited to participate in the second step of this study.

Step two of the study involves participating in two interviews, an initial face-to-face interview and a follow-up telephone interview. Interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient for you and will last between 1 ½ to 2 hours. In both interviews, you will be asked questions about your experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Both interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Initial interviews will be conducted in person. Follow-up interviews will be conducted by telephone approximately 6 months after the initial interviews. All of the information collected is confidential. Do you think this is a study in which you might be willing to participate? [If “yes,” proceed with script. If “no,” then thank the individual for their time and ask them for names of people they know who may potentially be interested in participating in this study].

I will mail to you a consent form to read in further considering whether or not you would be willing to participate in this study. The consent form describes this study in detail. Included in the consent form is my contact information so that you can reach me should any questions arise once you read the consent form. I will also include the
demographic questionnaire in this mailing. I will contact you within a week of your receiving these forms to see if you have any additional questions about the study. At that time you may also indicate whether you continue to be interested in being considered for participation in the interview part of this study. I will also ask you for names and contact information of other individuals who may be interested in participating in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this study.

If the individual would like to receive a consent form and demographic questionnaire, a mailing address will be obtained. The consent form and demographic questionnaire will be mailed and a follow-up phone call will be placed to the individual approximately one week after the forms have been mailed.
APPENDIX E

Cover Letter for Mailing that Includes Consent Document and Demographic Questionnaire
Dear ___________________(fill in name of participant),

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my study on women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. As mentioned in our previous contact, I have included in this mailing both the participant consent documents and the demographic questionnaire. You will also find a self-addressed stamped envelope to be used for returning a copy of the participant consent document and the demographic questionnaire to me should you decide to participate in this study.

Please take time to read the participant consent document. If after reading the document, you would like to participate in this study, please sign one copy and return it to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Please retain the additional copy of the participant consent document for your own records.

I have also enclosed a demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the questionnaire and return it to me, along with the signed copy of the participant consent document, in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. From the group of participants who complete consent documents and demographic questionnaires, I will then invite a smaller group of participants to take part in the interviews. I will notify you phone or by email, depending on your preference, whether or not you have been invited to participate in the interview part of the study.
Please feel free to contact me by phone at (574)254-0359 or by email at sharon.a.carney@wmich.edu should you have any questions.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sharon A. Carney
Western Michigan University  
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology  
Principal Investigator: Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.  
Student Investigator: Sharon A. Carney, M.A.

Title of the Study: A qualitative study of women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process.

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study being conducted by Sharon A. Carney, M.A., in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University. This study is conducted under the supervision of Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D., of Western Michigan University.

The purpose of this study is to understand how women therapists experience spirituality in the counseling process. We believe that this is an important area of research, in that multicultural competencies and guidelines acknowledge the importance of attending to gender and spirituality, along with other dimensions of diversity, in therapy. By conducting this study, we hope to give voice to women therapists’ experiences of spirituality in the counseling process and learn more about how the spirituality of therapists impacts the work that they do and how spirituality can be a source of support and empowerment in the therapy process.

Participation in the study involves two steps. The first step involves completing a demographic questionnaire, which should take about 10-15 minutes. This information will be used to select a diverse sample of participants. If an
individual is selected from among those who agree to participate, she will be invited to participate in the second step of this study. If an individual has returned a demographic questionnaire and is not selected for step two, she will be notified by phone or email, depending on her preference as indicated in the demographic questionnaire.

Step two of the study involves participating in two interviews, an initial interview and a follow-up interview. Interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient for participants and will last between 1 ½ to 2 hours. In both interviews, participants will be asked questions about their experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Both interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Initial interviews will be conducted in person. Prior to the initial interview, participants will be sent a guide providing general topics of interview questions on which to reflect in order to help them prepare for the interview. After transcribing all of the participants' initial interviews, the student investigator will write individual narratives for each participant as well as a collective story based on the experiences of the whole group of participants.

Follow-up interviews will be conducted by telephone approximately 6 months after the initial interviews. Prior to the follow-up interview, the student investigator will send each participant a copy of their individual narrative and the collective story. During the follow-up interview, each participant will be asked questions about her responses as well as her thoughts and feelings about her individual narrative and the
collective story. Total expected participant time is five to seven hours across six months.

All of the information collected from participants is confidential. Demographic information that participants provide will be used for the purpose of participant selection and to describe the participants in aggregate. When writing the collective story and in presenting data, extended quotes may be used; however, any specific words, phrases, or information that could identify participants will not be used. Participants’ identities will not be connected to their responses in any way. Pseudonyms will be used to identify participants in reports of the research. All research materials will be coded, and the student investigator will keep a separate master list of the code numbers that match the pseudonyms. After the data is collected and analyzed, this master list will be destroyed. Only the research team may read transcripts of the interviews. The research team consists of the student investigator, principal investigator, the student investigator’s doctoral committee, and an auditor who will review each step of the research process. Prior to soliciting feedback from any member of the research team, the student investigator will first make sure potentially identifying information (such as town or workplace names) are removed from the transcripts. Audio tapes will be destroyed after the data is collected and analyzed; the transcripts and other research materials will be retained in a locked filing cabinet for a minimum of three years in the principal investigator’s office. If publication of all or parts of the dissertation occurs, data will remain stored in a
locked file at the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University for seven years after publication, in accordance with the practices of the American Psychological Association. After this time, all data will be destroyed.

Possible risks of participation in this study include mild stress or emotional discomfort in recalling and sharing information about your own experiences of spirituality and its intersection with your identity as a woman and as a therapist. Should you become significantly upset by the interview process, the interview can be stopped at any time. Benefits of participation may include reflecting on issues pertaining to spirituality both personally and professionally, and contributing to a study that has the potential to inform your own work with clients. Likewise, you may benefit from the awareness that you are participating in giving voice to women’s stories about spirituality in the counseling process, stories that have often been silenced or neglected in the past.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question, change your mind about participating, or withdraw from the study without prejudice or penalty. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact the student investigator, Sharon A. Carney, M.A., at (574) 254-0359 or sharon.a.carney@wmich.edu, or the principal investigator, Dr. Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D., at (269)387-5113 or mary.anderson@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at Western Michigan University at
(269)387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at Western Michigan University at (269)387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate if the stamped date is more than one year old.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

________________________    __________________________

Sharon A. Carney, M.A.        Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.

By providing a signature below, you are indicating that you have read the procedures described above, and that you agree to participate in this study, including completing a demographic questionnaire and two interviews. Please return this signed form to the student investigator in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. An additional copy of this consent document is enclosed for your records.

________________________    __________________________

Participant’s Signature       Date
APPENDIX G

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: July 25, 2005

To: Mary Anderson, Principal Investigator
   Sharon Carney, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Mary Lagerwey, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 05-06-22

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "A Qualitative Study of Women Therapists' Experiences of Spirituality in the Counseling Process" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: July 25, 2006
Pseudonym:___________________________________________________________

Please check below your preferred method of communication while involved in this study, including how you would like to be notified as to whether or not you have been invited to participate in the interview part of this study:

_______ Phone

_______ Email

Please respond to the questions below by filling in the blank or circling the choices that best describe you.

Gender:___________________________________________________________

Age:________________________________________________________________

Sexual Orientation:________________________________________________________________

Race/ethnicity (please circle):
1. American Indian or Alaskan Native
   Specify tribal affiliation:
   _____________________________________________________________________

2. Asian or Pacific Islander
   Specify ethnicity:
   _____________________________________________________________________

3. African-American/Black, not of Hispanic Origin
   Specify ethnicity:
   _____________________________________________________________________

4. Hispanic
   Specify ethnicity:
   _____________________________________________________________________

5. Caucasian, European American, not of Hispanic Origin
   Specify ethnicity:
   _____________________________________________________________________

6. Bi-racial/Multi-racial
   Specify ethnicity:
   _____________________________________________________________________
Language (please circle):
1. English as primary language
2. English as second language (please specify primary language)

Citizenship:
Please specify country of citizenship:

Disability (please circle all that apply):
1. None—No Disability
2. Physical/Orthopedic Disability
3. Blind/Visually Impaired
4. Deaf/Hard of Hearing
5. Learning/Cognitive Disability
6. Developmental Disability
7. Serious Mental Illness
8. Other:

Social Class (please circle):
1. Lower class
2. Lower middle class
3. Middle class
4. Upper middle class
5. Upper class

Relationship Status (please describe):

Religious or spiritual affiliation of family of origin (please describe):
Current religious or spiritual affiliation (please describe):

Recognizing the limitations of this request for such a brief response, please share in 3-5 sentences how you personally define spirituality:
Highest educational degree obtained: ______________________________________

Field of study: ______________________________________________________

State in which you work: _____________________________________________

Professional work setting (i.e., university counseling center, community mental health agency, private practice). If you work in multiple settings, please list them all and an approximate amount of time spent at each setting per week:

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Occupation/Professional title: __________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Number of years working as a therapist: _________________________________

Theoretical Orientation (please circle all that apply):

Behavioral
Cognitive Behavioral
Eclectic
Psychodynamic/Psychoanalytic
Humanistic/Existential
Other: ________________________________

Integrative
Interpersonal/Relational
Feminist
Systems
Population served (please describe the population to whom you provide services):

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________


Please estimate the number of hours per week spent in various work-related activities:
(e.g.: Individual therapy 10 hrs.; Group therapy 0 hrs., Assessment 5 hrs., Case management 7 hrs.)

Individual therapy: ____________________________  
Group therapy: ________________________________  
Assessment: _________________________________  
Case management: ____________________________  
Outreach: ___________________________________  
Teaching: ________________________________    
Other (please describe): ____________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
APPENDIX I

Contact Script for Respondents to the Demographic Questionnaire Not Selected for Interviews
Hello, ____________(name of respondent), this is Sharon Carney. I am contacting you because you previously responded with interest in participating in a study about women therapists and spirituality. I want to thank you for your response; however I will not be able to include you in interviews. I have selected a small number of participants with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics, and unfortunately, I am not able to interview everyone who indicated interest in this study. Thank you for your response and for your interest in this study.
APPENDIX J

Letter Prior to Initial Interview
Dear ____________________(fill in name of participant),

I am looking forward to meeting with you on __________________(fill in date and time of interview) to interview you about your experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Prior to our interview, I am asking that you reflect on the following areas that will be discussed during our interview:

• Your experience of spirituality in the counseling process
• Ways in which your spirituality appears in the work that you do as a therapist
• Your view of how spirituality contributes to the counseling process
• Your experience of how the interaction or relationship between the client and you, the therapist, informs how spirituality is present in the counseling process
• Your personal definition or sense of spirituality

If you find it helpful to take notes or write down key ideas as you are reflecting, please feel free to do so. Thank you for taking the time to reflect on these general topic areas.

Sincerely,

Sharon A. Carney
Please tell me a little bit about yourself and what drew you to participate in this study.
(Also can prompt to share about professional and religious and spiritual background)

In our interview today, there are five main areas that I wish to learn about:

- Your experience of spirituality in the counseling process
- Ways in which your spirituality appears in the work that you do as a therapist
- Your view of how spirituality contributes to the counseling process
- Your experience of how the interaction or relationship between the client and you, the therapist, informs how spirituality is present in the counseling process
- Your personal definition or sense of spirituality—what your definition of spirituality looks like for you

Please start wherever you would like, perhaps with one of these areas that you can most connect with right now, and share your story. We’ll talk for a while and then I’ll pause and think about where we have been and what else we need to talk about. Which one of these areas would you like to start with?

Prompts/Follow-up Questions:

Let’s focus in next on another of these big areas…

- Context/background information
  - Please talk about how spirituality emerged as an important aspect in your work as a therapist.
• Your experience of spirituality in the counseling process
  o How do you, as a woman and a therapist, experience spirituality in the
counseling process?

  o Have you always experienced spirituality in the counseling process? How did
  it begin to emerge? What led it to grow? What has been influential in allowing
  you to experience this?

  o Are there times when you do not experience spirituality in the counseling
  process? Please share some examples. How do you view this impacting the
  therapeutic relationship and the outcome of counseling?

• Ways in which your spirituality appears in the work that you do as a therapist
  o How does being a spiritual woman impact your work as a therapist?

  o In what ways does spirituality enter the work that you do as a therapist?

  o Talk about the connections between your use of spirituality in counseling and
  your theoretical orientation.

• Your view of how spirituality contributes to the counseling process
  o Do you find spirituality coming into play in therapy in ways other than
  content? How? What might be some examples?
• How does spirituality contribute to the counseling process? What are some examples from your clinical work of how spirituality contributes to the counseling process?

• What do you know about how clients experience spirituality in the counseling process?

• Your experience of how the interaction or relationship between the client and you, the therapist, informs how spirituality is present in the counseling process

  • How do you see spirituality present in the relationship between you and your clients? Does it shift with different clients?

  • How do you see spirituality in the counseling process impacting the effectiveness of your work with clients?

  • Are there particular issues or populations with whom you work where your sense of spirituality and/or identity as a woman become more salient?

Prompt for explaining what is meant by counseling process:

Counseling process refers to the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of both therapist and client during therapy sessions, including the interactions between the therapist and client.
Additional probes:

Tell me more about this.

Please share an example.

How was that for you?

How did you feel?

What happened exactly?

How did that experience impact you?

How did you react?

What was the reaction of others/your client?

How does this connect to counseling process?

How does this connect to your experience of spirituality?

How does this connect to your experience of being a woman?
APPENDIX L

Letter Prior to Follow-Up Interview
Dear ________________ (fill in name of participant),

I am looking forward to talking with you on ____________ (fill in date and time of interview) for our follow-up interview about your experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. Enclosed is a copy of a narrative I have written based on your individual story, as well as a collective story I have written based on my initial interviews with all participants. It is important to me that we have the opportunity to talk about how accurately your own experiences are reflected in your individual narrative, as well as how inclusive the collective story is of your own experiences and whether this story sparks further thoughts about your own experiences of spirituality in the counseling process. I appreciate your taking the time to read these stories, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Sharon A. Carney
Ann grew up attending an African-American Episcopal church and Catholic school. She states that her church was inclusive, uplifting, and provided a sense of community and role models and mentors. Ann was encouraged to explore her own beliefs and has a history of thinking about spiritual issues that continues to manifest in her desire to help and care for other people.

Ann experiences spirituality as a way of life in which she can be herself. She comments that it is always present; therefore always present in the counseling process. She experiences spirituality in the counseling process as compassion for others and wanting to help others and make a difference in the world. She also experiences spirituality in her view that everyone has value and that she can learn from the beliefs of others. Ann notes that her definition of spirituality has broadened over the years, initially equating spirituality with religiosity, but now viewing spirituality in a more inclusive manner in which she sees value in all spiritual beliefs.

Correspondingly, the way Ann’s spirituality appears in her work as a therapist is framed by her view of spirituality as an aspect of diversity. She reports that with her background in multicultural counseling and urban mental health, she has learned to walk a fine line between maintaining boundaries and going outside of the box for the good of the client. Ann engages in the struggle between honoring her spiritual beliefs and the stricter boundaries of the counseling profession. She states that there are times when she has to go to bat for her beliefs. She shared the example that bible verses have been used throughout history to oppress various groups, and Ann will challenge others on this and encourage people to look critically at their beliefs. She states that she also believes that as a therapist, she must look at the whole person and not chose one dimension of diversity or one dimension of spirituality to focus on at the expense of other dimensions. Ann also views her spirituality as being present in her emphasis on helping clients to access their strengths so as to build on them, instilling hope, and promoting balance in life. Her nurturing presence enhances a sense of safety and trust in the therapy relationship, commenting that she believes her clients get the sense that she cares for them as a nurturing parent or mother would. Ann states that she tries to meet the client where he/she is and to be present in the moment with the client.

Ann views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in terms of serving as a foundation for making sense of the world and making meaning in life. She talked about helping students grapple with questions such as “how do you make sense of being at war? Killing people?” Ann spoke about spirituality as helping a person to critically examine issues and make sense of them for oneself. She shared an example of a woman whose son is gay and questioned in therapy how her religion, which she believed would condemn her to hell if she continued to have a relationship with her son, and her human experience as a mother give her such different messages. Ann emphasized the need to challenge assumptions and distinguish between spirituality and religiosity, commenting that a person can be spiritual but not religious, and a person can also be religious but not spiritually inclusive. Ann indicated that her spirituality is also present in helping clients address their values and identify their guiding set of principles and beliefs, again emphasizing the importance that she places on being comfortable as a therapist with clients questioning what they have been taught, so as to better understand for
themselves the principles they live by and can draw upon in times of need. She comments that this work of understanding self as well as how others live and make sense of the world can helping in connecting with others, which is consistent with her own view of spirituality that is inclusive and takes everyone in. Ann also views her own spirituality contributing to the counseling process in her own ability and in her role in assisting clients to learn to hold two things true at the same time and still be ok with that, holding both/and rather than being confined to either/or thinking. When asked about the client's experience, Ann shared that at times spirituality can be seen as a taboo topic and can then be like an elephant in the room, desperately needing to be acknowledged and attended to. She emphasized the importance of naming spirituality and opening the door to discuss it.

Ann describes spirituality being present in the therapy relationship in her valuing of all people, shown by use of inclusive language and environment, as well as by meeting the client where they are and being willing to go to a deeper level in understanding the client, rather than staying on the surface. Ann also talks about flexibility and openness, as well as a sense of safety in the therapy relationship. Ann views her sense of spirituality, and identity as an African-American woman as being interconnected, commenting that she cannot separate out her various dimensions of identity, but rather views herself and her clients from a holistic perspective with all dimensions connected. She views her sense of spirituality and identity as an African-American woman as being particularly salient in working with women in general and specifically African-American women, emphasizing connection and caring, as well as the flexibility, acceptance, ability to cope and sense of survival that comes with membership in oppressed groups. She spoke specifically about relationship issues and sense of connection to others, commenting that the desire to relate to and get along with people can serve as a common ground and starting point. Ann emphasized her multiple dimensions of identity as being salient in working with those who have been injured within relationships, survivors of trauma and others who have been victimized, offering a sense of safety and nurturing to these clients. She also addressed the need to be able to take care of oneself and to engage in self-care as a therapist and to encourage self-care in clients.
Carmen’s Story

Carmen has spent years exploring her own beliefs and sense of spirituality. Fundamental to her are the beliefs that people are here for a reason, that there is purpose in life and that we all grow. In this continual process of growth, she believes that we are not learning but instead re-learning what we already know and that spirituality is part of this process. She states that she did not grow up in a very religious family, but, even during periods when she believed she was atheist or agnostic, she was never without another, never feeling alone or that this is all there is. Carmen utilized her exploration of religion to challenge the patriarchal base and to cultivate a sensitivity to how religion affects us and to what spirituality means to us individually and as women. Carmen has experienced personal growth as a woman, commenting that this is due to her age, to growing up at a time when women’s roles were clearly defined and subservient, and then having to grow out of that and fight battles along the way. She became involved in the women’s movement and had to grapple with what it would be like to live differently than how she was brought up and what she learned in her own religion. Thus, Carmen frames her sense of spirituality as an outgrowth of being a woman.

Carmen’s sense of spirituality, identity as a woman and as a therapist are interconnected. She believes they are all natural parts of who she is and could not exist without each other. She views these aspects of herself as being present in her desire to help others and in her caring about other people. She notes that she even considered a career in a religious setting and she spoke about the many roles that women play, including mother and sister, as including aspects of caretaking. She also emphasizes the role that connection plays in being able to help others, and has noticed over time that her experiences as a therapist often run parallel with the issues in her own personal development.

Carmen experiences spirituality as an other, not necessarily saying God, as Carmen prefers not to label it, explaining that it won’t be the same for everyone. She further explains that it has to do with acknowledging the experience of another in which she feels excited and alive, particularly when she feels a connection, emphasizing that she never feels alone. Within the counseling process, Carmen experiences spirituality as being like some other force working. She describes this as being similar to experiencing art and music, in that it happens out of something else, commenting that we have the instruments and skills, “but where does the symphony come from?” She speaks of the pleasure loving what she does as a therapist and of being part of the process. Carmen also experiences spirituality as helping her to learn through her clients.

Carmen’s spirituality appears in her choice of profession, explaining that she has followed her bliss in becoming a therapist. Carmen views her identities as a woman, therapist, and spiritual person as being integrated and present in her work as a therapist. She strives to be genuine in her work as a therapist, recognizing that in order to help her clients to being in touch with who they are, she must also be who she is. Likewise, she also fosters a sense of safety, security and stability for clients, and accesses patience through her spirituality. Carmen also sees her spirituality as being present in her ability to hold a client’s pain and yet not take it home with her, trusting that she does not have to fix it or carry it with her. Carmen tends to draw upon existentialist and Jungian perspectives, looking for what clients can tell her about themselves, how they got where
they are, and their beliefs. Carmen views a sense of spirituality underlying everything, explaining that she considers everyone, just as they have physical, intellectual, and emotional selves, to have a spiritual self—something bigger than self that they can tap into, something beyond what we know.

Carmen views spirituality as being ever present and intertwined in the counseling process. She believes it is essential to helping and that without spirituality as part of the process, there would be no process. She believes that people are here for a reason, that there is purpose in life and that we all grow, and that in her role as a therapist, she helps clients create the structure to be able to find and access their own sense of spirituality. She spoke about helping clients to make spirituality their own, take it in and make it part of their life. She also views spirituality as being present when grappling with difficult questions, such as Who am I? What is my role in life?, making meaning in their own lives and worlds. Carmen sees spirituality as a strength that can be drawn on in therapy and comments that sometimes clients grow in faith while in the counseling process, often through the process of making meaning and connection. She comments that she senses connection with others, whether with people, animals, or nature, as a source of comfort and helping oneself in working through difficult issues. She also views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in creating safety and openness to various spiritual beliefs from a place of non-judgment. Spirituality can also contribute to the counseling process through ritual, and Carmen spoke about the role of ritual in helping women to take care of themselves spiritually, whether it be through meditation, connection with nature, or through creating a ritual to commemorate the anniversary of a loss. When asked how she views clients as experiencing spirituality in the counseling process, Carmen spoke about clients asking difficult questions and tapping into their beliefs, making choices about living and feeling empowered to do so, and structuring their own sense of spirituality.

Within the therapy relationship, Carmen sees spirituality present in the connection between counselor and client and in their mutual respect and regard. She also emphasizes spirituality as being present in compassion, meeting clients’ needs, and taking an approach that values the whole person, honoring the multiple aspects of the client’s being. Carmen identifies her sense of spirituality and identity as a woman as particularly salient in her work as a sex therapist and with transgender clients, speaking about this as a calling and commenting on her sense of compassion for clients who have been silenced about this aspect of their being. She also finds it salient in her work with women and children, marriage issues, death and dying, and sexuality. Carmen states that her sense of spirituality and identity as a woman is also salient in working with men and in addressing problems with parental bonds in which clients must make choices about what is done their own way and what is done the way they were taught. Carmen spoke about her sense of spirituality as helping her to be aware of when a relationship is not working, and as giving her insight into herself to know that there are particular clients she will not work with, including child abusers, because she has not gone far enough in her own development to be able to be helpful to them. Ultimately, Carmen views spirituality as underlying all aspects of life and thus all issues having a spiritual underpinning.
China’s Story

China grew up Lutheran and chose to stay Lutheran as an adult, explaining that this is the one thing that is the same from her childhood and serves as a connection to her family. She describes herself as being liberal and taking aspects of this religion that fit for her and leaving what does not. China’s image of God is that of a kind parent of both genders that is nurturing, loving, having good boundaries, being a truth-teller and affirming of people’s goodness. Her sense of spirituality brings together the male and female with an appreciation of the strengths of both genders. She views God as being wise and not happy or sad, recognizing that life is not all about happiness and that we as humans also learn from pain. China believes that God does not do bad things to people, sharing instead that she believes we have free will, and in that free will, we sometimes hurt others. At these times, she believes that God weeps with us and can be there with us. China also spoke of the importance of staying in touch with her higher power, whether through prayer, gratitude, reflection and quiet, slowing down, listening, and getting in touch with spirit through other people. China’s sense of spirituality, identity as a woman and identity as a therapist are integrated, not separate parts of her. She has a strong spiritual connection that serves as a base and can bring a balance to the many aspects of her life, recognizing that women often need to juggle many roles. She notices shift in salience of her multiple dimensions of identity, commenting that some come to the forefront because the situation demands it or she is in a certain place; however all aspects, spirituality, woman, and therapist, are still present and each informs the other.

Throughout our conversation about spirituality in the counseling process, China emphasized the importance of trusting that she is not alone and not in charge, drawing upon her faith that there is some power in the universe that is in charge and that all she can do is the best she knows how to do, making use of the gifts and talents she has been given. China credits parenthood as instrumental in her spiritual life and cultivating her focus on letting go, surrendering, accepting her limitations, and finding comfort in her trust in and connection to something larger than herself, particularly in times of fear. Her sense of spirituality seems to permeate her life and consequently is present in her work as a therapist.

China experiences spirituality in the counseling process in her sense of connection, trusting that she is not alone and taking comfort in her belief that she is not in charge. She uses the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to illustrate her belief that therapy can help to provide a different perspective, much like turning a kaleidoscope and looking at the same things but seeing it differently. She views faith as providing a way to turn the lens and this different perspective as a gift. China’s experience of spirituality in the counseling process has emerged, and she comments that as a trainee the focus was on doing what was expected, but after having been working in one place long enough and becoming known, she is trusted and has more flexibility, particularly with regard to tending to spirituality. China notes that spirituality can often be a taboo topic, with therapists fearful of imposing their values on their clients. China tends to ask about spirituality at the beginning of her relationship with the client and is conscious of power dynamics from a feminist perspective, finding out about the client’s own sense of spirituality so as to not make assumptions about the client’s faith. She sites this as being important in attending to issues of diversity and respecting the client’s perspective. China
is open to learning from everyone and values creativity and thinking outside the box, particularly when bridging differences in religion between counselor and client in a manner that can help the client to cultivate compassion and be non-judgmental of self. China experiences spirituality in meeting the client where they are, entering into their world, joining with them, and attending to their needs. China views spirituality as a source of strength that can be used in coping and in creating and maintaining a balanced life.

China’s spirituality appears in her work as a therapist in her trust that everything is connected, that everything fits together in a way that is part of a larger plan. China’s spirituality appears in her acceptance of her own limitations and recognizing that the world is not in her control. She comments that as a therapist she has a role and responsibility, but that there is a lot that is beyond her control, which ties directly to her sense of spirituality. China speaks about spirituality as going through other people and being present in her connection to them. China’s spirituality also appears in her use of prayer. She does not pray with clients unless invited to do so by the client, but will pray about clients, especially when she is worried about them to manage her fears. She also prays about using her own gifts and talents. She prays not to over or under react to client issues, particularly when she has difficulty liking a client. She prays that she will be compassionate. China’s spirituality is also present in her work as a therapist in her beliefs about things coming together, with something in the spiritual realm saying this is the person I’m supposed to be and this is who I am supposed to be working with.

Within the therapy relationship, China strives to be accepting and affirming of the spiritual aspects of a client’s life. She uses modeling and self-disclosure to allow clients to see her relying on her own faith as a source of strength and coping strategy. She sees the relationship and the work done together in therapy as part of a bigger whole in which the goal is not to “fix” things but instead to help the client trust themselves more, have coping strategies, and function in a way that when the next thing happens in life they are more prepared to handle it. China’s sense of spirituality and identity as a woman are especially salient when working with a male perpetrator, explaining that she has a responsibility to be as objective as she can and not make assumptions, being present so that she can look at how best to help him and help the world. When unable to work with a client because she feared for her safety, China drew upon spirituality in recognizing that he deserved to have someone who could be present to him and she deserved to take care of herself. China also spoke about her spirituality in working with a client who is atheist and suicidal, commenting that she would feel more comfortable if this client had a faith-based to draw upon for support, but recognizing that she cannot impose her beliefs on this client. Instead, China draws upon her own spirituality in working with this client, containing her own worries and anxiety around the client’s suicidality and trusting the best in herself and her client.

China views spirituality as always present, thus always contributing to the counseling process. She speaks about being present to the client, being non-judgmental, and teaching clients to trust themselves and build on their strengths, with spirituality a potential source of strength. China chooses to work out of trusting the best in the client and in herself, helping clients to see their own strengths, rather than operating out of a fear-based perspective. She considers spirituality as instrumental in being able to contain fear. When working with difficult clients, China is aware that something greater is
guiding her and helping her to be present and non-judgmental. China also views her ability to care for herself as having a spiritual component in accessing support from her colleagues and prayer life. When discussing how clients experience spirituality in the counseling process, she drew upon her own experiences as a client with more non-traditional interventions including sand therapy and music, which allowed her the comfort of getting out of her head and the intellectual realm. She spoke about empowering clients to look at their faith from a broader perspective, and she commented on spirituality being pivotal in some sessions while being more in the background in others.
Elfy’s Story

Elfy grew up in a Calvinist home and has always been fascinated by religion. She has been involved in Quakerism and Unitarianism, as well as earth-based and goddess-based spirituality. Elfy is now focused more internally and connects spiritually through yoga, reading, meditation, and prayer. She is an alcoholic and attends AA meetings and connects her recovery with a deepening of her spiritual journey. She views this journey as life changing, fostering healing in many dimensions of her life. The women in Elfy’s life have personified spirituality for her, including her mother, grandmothers, teachers, and AA sponsors, and have helped to shape her own prayer life and sense of spirituality.

Elfy experiences spirituality in the counseling process as ever-present. It is a resource, support, and source of strength. She describes it as feeling held by the creator and by the therapy process. She believes that clients are brought to her for a reason. Elfy views knowing that there is a power greater than ourselves as an integral part of her identity and relies on being able to connect with that power. Elfy experiences spirituality as the power of something in the counseling process that is greater than either herself or her client. She describes allowing that power to work in the process as a gift. She explains that at times when she is really listening to someone’s heart and providing them with the opportunity to speak from their heart, she feels she becomes a conduit or vessel, with God channeling through her the words she shares with her client. Elfy experiences spirituality through connection and views connecting with a client as a privilege. Elfy also speaks about connection with the community, for example by asking people within a support network to pray, which helps clients to see that they are not alone and are connected to something larger. Elfy is purposeful about ensuring that there is a sense of spirituality in the therapy process and that there is space and safety to dialogue about spirituality. She notes the impact of her own spiritual practice, commenting that it naturally ebbs and flows into whatever else she does, which fits with her perspective that all aspects of identity, as a woman, therapist, and spiritual person, are connected and cannot be separated out. As Elfy’s own sense of spirituality has grown over the years, so too has it grown in her practice. Elfy experiences spirituality in her ability to meet clients where they are and in her belief that she learns from her clients.

Within the therapy relationship, Elfy encourages listening to soul or spirit rather than getting caught up in intellectualizing. Elfy connects isolation from others and from spirit as continuing in sadness and desperation and hopes to convey to clients that they are not alone and are held by something greater. She also emphasizes being open and present to the lessons in each day and in the people around us that are there to teach us about ourselves. Elfy views her sense of spirituality and identity as a woman as being salient across all ages and genders. She views it as ever-present and comments that she is glad that she cannot link it to particular clinical issues because this is consistent with her openness and broad, far-reaching conceptualization of spirituality. Elfy notes that most often clients seek to address who they are in relationship, and in her work with them, she tries to encourage them to be in relationship with another power that is greater.

Elfy’s spirituality appears in her work as a therapist by attending to the whole person, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. She encourages clients to speak from their hearts rather than heads. Elfy’s spirituality appears in her use of ritual, including lighting a candle at the beginning of each session, which helps in setting intention,
direction, and leading to greater depth and better sense of self spiritually. She states that clients often build on that ritual, bringing in poetry and drawing on their own personal symbolism attached to lighting a candle. Elfý also incorporates metaphor and symbolism in her inclusion of fireflies and dragonflies, part of her totem, into her physical space. These creatures with wings symbolize her hope that her clients will experience a greater lightness of being and the ability to soar as they progress in therapy. She is purposeful in providing a comfortable healing physical space that also includes books that incorporate spirituality and a water fountain as a source of meditation. Elfý’s spirituality is also present in providing comfort to clients and a sense of feeling held when she conveys to them that she will be thinking of them or praying for them during a difficult time. She also seeks to nurture who we are as spiritual people and respects the client’s spirituality, not imposing her own beliefs but rather encouraging them to discover who they are as a spiritual person.

Elfý views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in reflection, pause and silence, being still and listening to what is deeper within us and being open to something greater, recognizing that we are not alone but are loved by a power greater than us. Elfý talks about being present and connecting in the counseling process, intermingling the power of the therapy process with spiritual presence. She helps clients walk through their fears and comments that a byproduct of doing so is that it can bring people closer to their sense of spirit. She views spirituality as existing without having to talk about it, and will use different modalities in therapy, including walking in nature and writing. When asked about how clients experience spirituality in the counseling process, she shared that clients request spirituality in therapy and come to see her because their spiritual hearts are wounded. She provides a space in which clients can refigure or configure a sense of who they are spiritually.
Ellen's Story

Ellen describes spirituality as something bigger about life than she as a human has the capacity to fully understand, and like creativity and emotion, spirituality can be difficult for her to describe verbally. Ellen is atheist and does not believe in a personal god, but instead views spirituality as being about something bigger than she as a human can fully understand about life and the universe. She views it more as an experience, being able to sense and feel spirituality. In describing her background, Ellen notes that she did not incorporate her way of thinking about spirituality with some of the other dimensions of her identity, as the concept of spirituality was absent from much of her identity development, coming to the forefront after graduate school. In the past, she associated access to spirituality with the prototypically feminine but now tends to see spirituality as having elements of both genders. She personally experiences spirituality in nature, creativity and art, stories and metaphors, and in everyday experiences. Ellen believes there are many paths to spirituality. She has been influenced in her work as a therapist by Unitarian Universalist perspectives, including belief in the interdependent web of all living things, the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, and the value of everyone's voice.

Ellen experiences spirituality in the counseling process as always present even when not overtly aware of it. Spirituality is integrated into everything, showing up in her work because it is part of who she is. She views spirituality as a dimension of all human experience. She states that it emerged for her, explaining that as a beginning therapist she was too anxious to experience anything. In her own development, as she became more aware of spirituality, it also showed up more in her clinical work, and she has been able to incorporate it more effectively and organically as she has gotten more experience. She states that she struggles with how to handle the distinction between religion and spirituality, commenting that spirituality is complex and difficult to articulate. She views spirituality as similar to diversity, commenting that both are complex and hard to define, yet always present and significant. She is open to the client’s spirituality or religion and tries to understand how they view it and incorporate it into their lives. Ellen focuses on meeting her clients where they are and working with what their belief system is and what they need.

Ellen’s spirituality appears in her work as a therapist in allowing space for everyone to be fully who they are, valuing that, and taking a holistic approach that honors the many dimensions of a person’s being. It also appears in her authenticity and being present in the moment with clients. When asked about how being a spiritual woman impacts her work as a therapist, Ellen spoke about identifying as a woman but having a sense of spirituality that has both male and female characteristics. Ellen sees being a woman as providing more of an opening to emotional aspects of spirituality. She spoke about the role of socialization in this, being taught from a young age that as a girl/woman, it is ok to access emotion. Ellen views emotion and spirituality as connected, wondering if emotions are a pathway to spirituality. She also finds that as a woman, her pathway to spirituality is through felt experiences of relationship. She identifies with being process-oriented as a woman and views spirituality as being process-oriented. Ellen also sees her spirituality appearing in her nurturing, earth-mother presence and in her holistic approach.

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Ellen views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process through connection. She describes this connection as a spiritual moment of transcendence, a heart-felt experience in which the client feels understood and there is a joining between herself and the client. She feels spiritually connected with the client and recognizes that this connection is bigger than the two of them. Ellen expresses a knowing that there is a bigger process at work in therapy and that she needs to follow it. She states that when she can surrender, powerful things happen. Ellen sees spirituality as a major dimension in relationships. Ellen believes that when spirituality is present in a relationship, there is healing. She believes that the deeper and more authentic the relationship is, the more spiritual it can be. She believes that spirituality is associated with cultivating a sense of safety and security, which then connects to how vulnerable and open the client is willing to be in therapy. Ellen speaks about a world being created between herself and the client, a combination of what each brings, yet something larger between them. She also emphasizes compassion and empathy, recognizing the value of all human beings. Ellen also views spirituality as a resource, as a dimension of identity and as a source of community. She believes that healing has to involve an element of spirituality, commenting on the miraculous nature of skin growing back together to heal a cut, and drawing a parallel with emotional and psychological healing.

When asked about how clients experience spirituality in the counseling process, Ellen expressed hesitancy to make assumptions about what clients might be experiencing. Ellen believes that clients experience it but is uncertain how they would articulate it, explaining that it often happens under the level of awareness. She believes that clients experience spirituality through healing and being in relationship. Spirituality is also present in the process of making meaning out of experiences, gaining insight and understanding. Ellen experiences spirituality in helping clients grapple with existential questions, the meaning of life, loss, and attachment. Issues or populations in which Ellen’s sense of spirituality and identity as a woman are particularly salient include griefwork and working with trauma survivors. She finds spirituality particularly present in her work with trauma survivors, being inspired by and recognizing the spiritual strength in the client’s ability to transcend their experiences and reclaim their spiritual core. Ellen also wonders about how spirituality will show up in her work around issues of substance abuse as she gains more experience in this area. Ellen connects earthiness and growth with spirituality and shared a clinical example to illustrate. Ellen worked with an African woman struggling with grief. At the end of their work together, the woman brought in a rooted plant, which represented her growth process and their connection, and the client spoke about her garden and how it was healing for her.
Erin’s Story

Erin identifies as Jewish and describes being brought up with Judaism as a way of life or culture. She started on her own spiritual journey, initiated when she began work in the chemical dependency field, to find her own personal connection to God. In doing chemical dependency counseling, Erin recognizes the spiritual process that every client goes through as part of their recovery and her role in going through it with them as a therapist. She states that she needed to find herself spiritually in order to work with this population. Being a mother and nursing her sons have been spiritual experiences for Erin. Through these experiences in sustaining life, she has felt a power of connectedness to her children and to God, with spirituality being present in these connections. Erin’s personal sense of spirituality focuses on finding a power outside of herself and finding her own spiritual relationship or personal connection to God. This also includes finding a sense of self and gaining greater awareness through this spiritual relationship about who she is as a person.

In chemical dependency work, Erin sees spirituality as present in the room, in both content and process, commenting that clients will talk about having a spiritual awakening and about God or a higher power as part of the 12 steps. Erin experiences spirituality in the counseling process in her sense of connectedness with herself and with God, which she can then draw on to establish rapport and trust with clients. She views spirituality as connectedness to others and feels more spiritually empowered as a therapist through human connection to clients. Erin also experiences spirituality in being present, centered and grounded in her work with clients. She describes her desire to help and her desire to be a rock for her clients, conveying to them that she is not going anywhere, is not going to judge them, and is going to be accepting of them. In order to be centered and present for her clients, she needs to stay connected to herself and continue to nourish herself spiritually, commenting that when she neglects her prayer life or doesn’t get enough sleep, she notices that she is less effective in therapy. Thus, for Erin, part of being spiritually grounded is tending to the whole self. Likewise, Erin’s own spiritual growth has impacted her clinical work, noting that she feels an increased sense of connectedness with mothers and families since her own marriage and motherhood. She states that she has an increased understanding of where her clients are because of her own life events, including confronting on a daily basis her own spiritual identity while dating, marrying, and navigating her relationship with her husband, who was raised Christian. Erin experiences spirituality in the counseling process as being different with every client, explaining that some may be hesitant to discuss spirituality. She believes that sharing of herself leads to increased connectedness and that the most vulnerable sharing is when it is focused on one’s sense of spirituality.

When asked about how clients experience spirituality in the counseling process, Erin states that it is more overtly present with clients who are in recovery because is it part of 12 step work, but that it can also be experienced as a shift in beliefs or a greater sense of spiritual freedom. She comments that it is experienced in being present to the client and that it ultimately depends on the client. Erin believes it is an ongoing, gradual process for clients. Issues or populations where Erin’s sense of spirituality and identity as a woman are particularly salient are in her work with addictions, trauma survivors, and working with perpetrators. She states that having a sense of self spiritually is vital to
working with chemical dependency issues. Likewise, Erin connects abuse with loss of belief and trust in the human spirit, so in therapy with survivors of abuse, she sees spirituality working through her as she models what a confident and empowered woman looks like. Erin has not worked with perpetrators but imagines that it would stretch her spiritually and that she would need to draw on a lot of spiritual strength.

Erin’s spirituality appears in her work as a therapist in her focus on being there for her clients and being spiritually grounded so that she can be present to them. She describes herself as action-oriented and as a teacher. Her overall goal is to empower each client so that they do not need her anymore, and she connects helping clients to build their sense of self and self-esteem as part of empowering them. She notes that clients have often gotten messages that they are unworthy and that they may feel uncertain about who they are and what they believe. She helps them to examine their belief systems and challenge underlying oppressive or condemning messages, thus empowering them to reclaim spirituality and develop their own belief systems. This is especially powerful in working with women, addiction, and survivors of trauma. Erin’s spirituality also appears in her willingness to engage with clients in their struggle with existential questions and in their efforts at finding meaning in life.

Erin views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in that it can serve as a source of strength. Likewise, she feels like spirituality is present in modeling ego strength, energy and confidence for clients and letting them borrow that when they leave. Erin’s clinical work impacts her sense of spirituality. She views human connectedness as being at the heart of her work as a therapist, and she comments that she feels connected with her higher power on a daily basis when she works with addicts, because in teaching and sharing she has to be continuously aware of who she is spiritually. When she feels human connection with a client, she feels more spiritually empowered, and she feels a sense of spiritual energy when she sees the process working. Erin identifies spirituality contributing to the counseling process in groupwork, commenting that it is the group process that aids in recovery. Through this process, members can instill hope, witness and learn from the progress of others, and draw on the collective power of everyone’s strength together. She sees spirituality working as she watches the group process unfold, witnessing the power of the process and of their higher power working for the group members. Erin also works to combat stereotypes about addiction in her role as a teacher, recognizing that extreme stereotyping can impede one’s recovery process. Likewise spirituality contributes in providing a different perspective and in grappling with one’s own beliefs. Erin has experienced sessions in which she knows God is present, commenting that she feels that something is working but it is not her or is not under her control. She states that this happens when she trusts herself to listen and trusts the therapy process. Spirituality also contributes to the counseling process in validating a client’s experience and conveying to them that she understands. Erin believes that there is an underlying universal human need to be understood by somebody and there is a spiritual connectedness in truly being present for, hearing, and reflecting understanding to a client.
Frances’s Story

Frances indicates that she has come into the helping profession naturally, with experiences in going through difficult times as a child, being a welfare mom, working in a domestic violence program and in infant mental health. During her childhood, she was exposed to a variety of different religions, commenting it would vary from neighborhood to neighborhood. As an adult she was embraced by the women’s community, the lesbian community, and was drawn to the spirituality in goddess worship, being feminist-oriented and womanist. She was also influenced by Buddhism, resonating with its sense of interconnectedness, presence, and sense of things being as they should, as well as the ancestral aspect of it and its focus on peace. Frances finds it helpful when she is anxious to let go and be present. Likewise she finds it helpful for anyone who cannot settle their heart and mind and be present, and will draw on Buddhist concepts in therapy. Aspects of being a woman that have influenced her spirituality include cycles and connecting with everything else in nature that is cyclic, as well as giving birth, opening up, allowing things to pass through, and nurturing. As a Native American, African-American, lesbian woman, she describes these dimensions of her identity as “not so much as marginalized as hazardous things to be in a lot of places.” She points to her existence as living a powerful statement, commenting “every time I show up, I show my face, that’s a profound statement, a radical act” that is about spiritual power and strength. Frances views her sense of spirituality, identity as a woman, and identity as a therapist connecting to each other in trusting that what little bit she can do can go a long way, emphasizing quality rather than quantity in engagement and nurturance, working from a place of caring, which to her is about spirituality.

Frances experiences counseling as a spiritual process, with clients often seeking counseling because they have lost some of their spirit. Frances states that she finds it most effective to come out of a place of caring and spirituality, rather than focusing on fixing and rebuilding. She also highlights connection and being present to the client as aspects of spirituality in the counseling process, with being present as essential to connecting with someone in pain. As Frances has grown in age and experience, so to has her capacity to care and her sense of confidence in trusting that caring, along with being present and wanting to connect, serve as her bottom line. Caring and presence contribute to comfort and safety in the therapy process, thereby helping clients to open up, begin to share, trust that she is feeling what is being said, and recognize that they are not alone in the world. Frances uses the metaphor of a hook, stating that within the counseling process, the counselor is a hook where the client can hang some of their burden and have a foundation. She recognizes that this burden is heavy for the client and accepts some of it, so that the client can then examine it without being crushed by it. Frances also experiences spirituality in validating the client’s experience. In her work with children with special needs, she has found it powerful to witness and play a role in the growth and progress of these children and their parents, commenting that it sometimes took a sixth sense to address the parents and encourage them to be courageous with their children.

Frances views her sense of spirituality and identity as a woman as particularly salient in working with children and their parents, particularly children with special needs. Spirituality has helped parents to manage their fears and grief and has been present in witnessing the growth of the children and the excitement of the parents. Frances views
Frances views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in what she calls the ancient faith in getting stuff out, an ancestral concept in which there is something spiritual about laying down your burdens, speaking how you feel and letting your feelings be known to another person. She comments that there is an ancient wisdom in having someone care about you, which is likewise true in the therapy process, bringing an ancient healing aspect to therapy. In this way, spirituality forms the foundation of her work. Spirituality serves as a resource in holding pain, in which the practice of being present, caring, and connecting with the client helps to dissipate any discomfort she might have. Frances likewise relies on spirituality for her own self-care. She also views spirituality as contributing in trusting the client’s process and trusting the counseling process. She has faith that movement is happening, sensing, in a way that is difficult for her to explain, that although it may be very still and quiet, something is happening, an emotional membrane is being broken through, which is spiritual. When asked how clients experience spirituality in the counseling process, she states that it varies from person to person, with each client expressing their faith in their own way. She senses that as a result of having gotten a different perspective, clients are often lighter, which carries over into their functioning outside of session.
Rebecca was raised in a fundamentalist Christian family. She states that she was not able to deal with her sexual orientation as an adolescent or in college, and that ultimately she was faced with a choice of herself or her religion, so she threw out her religion in her twenties. It was not until attending a conference on feminist therapy that included issues of lesbian psychology, feminist psychology, and psychology in general that her lesbian identity and professional identity were brought together. During that time, she also had a realization, while in nature, that we are all connected in one big network, which tied to her spiritual belief system. Three parts of her being that she thought were alienated from each other, lesbian, psychologist, and spiritual person, were finally connected and she was able to reclaim a spiritual base. Aspects of being a woman that have informed Rebecca’s sense of spirituality include having a genderless view of God, but being able to draw on a female image of God energy that is from the earth and about creation. Likewise her spirituality has been informed by the sense of power as empowerment, owning our own power, being responsible for our own power, being able to see things more complexly, and recognizing that everything is connected. Rebecca’s feminist beliefs are core to how she views her work as a therapist and are intertwined with her spirituality and humanism, with these aspects connected and blended together.

Rebecca experiences spirituality in the counseling process as broadly defined. Rebecca’s experience of spirituality in the counseling process emerged, beginning with a sense in her training that her value system should be kept separate. She has since evolved in being able to articulate and refine how spirituality is present in the counseling process. She views spirituality as being about how one makes meaning, purpose and connection. She believes in the power of love and connection and that love is ultimately more powerful than fear. She sees forming a strong therapeutic alliance and being connected to the client as vital. Likewise, she believes it is essential to have some spiritual base as a therapist, some kind of meaning system. Rebecca experiences spirituality in self-awareness, examining her own beliefs, and being open and honest to herself, trusting what she knows to be true and trusting her intuition. When she feels stuck, Rebecca will ask for help and then be open to whatever comes, commenting that doing therapy forces her to be open to her own experiences and that part of the challenge is to be a whole person while doing therapy, being open to and trusting herself and what she knows to be true. Rebecca believes it is important to understand boundaries in knowing what is her own belief system and what is the client’s belief system, not invading the client. The only time that Rebecca will counter a client’s belief system is if it is contributing to a negative self-concept, such as if the client believes that whatever happened to them was God’s punishment. Rebecca strives to understand the client’s spiritual beliefs, how they access their spirituality and how they feel about where they are with it. This is particularly important information in working with clients who are trying to heal or change patterns established in childhood that were adaptive for them as a child but now maladaptive as an adult. She utilizes interventions with spiritual aspects, including metaphors, ritual, meditation, and healing imagery. Likewise, if clients pray as part of accessing their spiritual belief system, she will encourage them to do so. Outside of the therapy session, Rebecca will pray for guidance in therapy. In her own self-care,
Rebecca will pray for guidance in therapy, and she focuses on what will feed her spiritually. Rebecca senses that there is energy in the world that is available and will ask for help. She explains that she feels like she is a conduit of healing energy cycling through her and into a client and back again. She sees God as an entire network of energy, of which we are each a part, with every living thing being a nodule on this energy belt. As a therapist, she tries to help that energy heal the wounds of the client. She uses the analogy of a furnace filter, explaining that when she has a lot of her own issues going on, she may have a dirty filter, which prevents energy from flowing through her and picks up negative energy from clients. She states that she has to work on keeping herself clean. If she has an insight, she offers it as a possibility not a truth, to the client, being aware that she cannot know exactly what is her’s and what is something bigger. She draws upon greater wisdom and sometimes that wisdom is from within the client. Likewise it may also be an internal voice guiding therapy. Rebecca views spirituality as a source of support in dealing with difficult issues, and comments that spirituality is particularly salient when healing is part of the work of therapy.

Rebecca’s spirituality appears in the work she does as a therapist in her effort to understand how people transform themselves and make sense of themselves. She recognizes that cultural context plays an important role in how people make meaning in their lives. Rebecca uses spirituality as the frame of therapy, explaining that it is a balance of brain, heart, spirit, and body. She conceptualizes spirituality as “the mode, method, and mechanism by which we connect to the larger arena of all other beings,” and that part of the challenge is to figure out how each person does this. Rebecca believes that we are here to grow and learn, with therapy allowing clients to reflect on their experiences and focus specifically on how these pieces of learning and growth impact the client’s whole being.

Within the therapy relationship, Rebecca views human connection as a spiritual conduit by which clients can accept hope. She expresses gratitude and feels privileged to help people function in a more whole, alive, and connected way. Issues or populations in which Rebecca’s sense of spirituality and identity as a woman are particularly salient include GLB populations, helping clients to find a place where they can access God as they understand it without alienating themselves, addictions, people from strongly religious backgrounds, and survivors of abuse. She also emphasizes the importance of attending to the culture of all clients, including understanding their faith, its messages about who they are and how they are supposed to be in the world, and how it impacts their current problem.

Rebecca views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in her view of humans as miracles of healing and naturally resilient, surviving terrible circumstances through connection with just one person who loves you. She comments that when we choose love, we stay connected; whereas when we choose fear, we separate, isolate, attack and hate. She believes that many therapeutic decisions are about trying to feed love versus feeding fear. Rebecca views God as a patient parent-teacher and life as an educational process. She ascribes to the notion that we actually are supposed to make mistakes in life, forgiving ourselves and learning from those experiences. She states that we only learn when connected to the whole journey, that we are all on the same journey, and that every life has lessons. Part of her work with clients is to get a sense of what
place in their journey they are working on. She makes an effort to be in the present with
the client, working in the context of who they are and how they are in the world and
meeting them there, keeping an open space for the client’s beliefs. When asked how
clients experience spirituality in the counseling process, she comments that they often
view therapy as separate from their spirituality and are surprised when she asks about
their spiritual beliefs and how they are working. Rebecca believes that all religions are
paths to some sense of God, so she focuses on how to help the client’s belief system work
for them.
Samantha Ann’s Story

Samantha Ann has been a religious and spiritual person since as early as she can remember, making a conscious decision at age five that she was going to join her church. Spirituality is integral in her life and has been throughout her life. She believes in and has a commitment to something greater than self that connects us all. This force or entity is ever present and can be used to strengthen or deepen sense of self and connectedness. She believes that it supports the development of respect and compassion, can ease all fears, and carries a wisdom beyond knowledge from which we all can draw. She uses many different words to describe this, including God, divine, and holy spirit, but states that it is the same sense of allness, the connectedness of all things.

Samantha Ann is always aware of spirituality and believes it is salient in her work with all clients. She identifies three parts to the experience of spirituality in the counseling process, what is going on in her, what is going on in the client, and what is going on in the relationship between Samantha Ann and the client. She views spirituality as different than religion, explaining that religion is often about dogma, guilt, fear, judgment, and needing to repent and work in therapy often needs to be done around releasing the client from religious ideology and allowing them to open more to the spiritual side. Samantha Ann also acknowledges and respects diversity in spirituality. Spirituality allows her to honor the client in recognizing that the client may be where they need to be at the time, getting a sense of the client’s spirituality and meeting them there. It helps her to focus on inner wisdom, trusting in that of the client and also trusting in her own inner wisdom. Samantha Ann draws from a base of spirituality, commenting that there are times when it feels like “inner wisdom, holy spirit, sense of connectedness, whatever you want to call it is just screaming at me to respond in a certain way or focus on a certain thing.” Samantha Ann invites clients to talk about spirituality, and she also believes that spirituality is present in the counseling process, even when the content is secular.

Samantha Ann considers nurturing as an aspect of being a woman that has informed her sense of spirituality, but states that she also knows men who are nurturing. She states that at times as a woman she was not taken seriously and felt vulnerable to being judged as not professional enough or too sentimental, especially if incorporating spirituality into therapy. Samantha Ann views her experience of spirituality in the counseling process as occurring in a bimodal fashion as she has grown in experience. She explains that early on, she paid a lot of attention to spirituality, but as she was pursuing her doctorate, she was getting lambasted for even suggesting the idea of spirituality, so she would resist it and question herself. She is now at a stage of life where she is more comfortable with spirituality in therapy and pays attention to it and trusts in it. Samantha Ann believes that the client’s experience of spirituality or the aspect of spirituality that influences them has to do with where they are with hope, with finding meaning in the life events that they’re confronting, with a sense of worthwhileness, with a belief in their connectedness to others, and then in honoring their own inner wisdom. Samantha Ann believes that the therapy relationship is impacted by the sense of connection between counselor and client, which then leads to the development of trust, opening to exploring the inner self. Samantha Ann believes that something larger often brings her together with her clients.

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Samantha Ann’s spirituality appears in her work as a therapist in her respect for the power of connectedness and inner wisdom. She talks about tuning into intuition, or something larger, that she also calls inner wisdom, holy spirit, sense of connectedness, and Sophia. She explains that Sophia is the name given to the wisdom literature in the Judeo-Christian tradition and is seen as the feminine energy, wisdom and truth. She believes this powerful wisdom is ever present and tries to pay attention to it, drawing upon it in her work as a therapist. Spirituality is intertwined in all aspects, as part of herself, her internal processing, and her conceptualizations of clients and their concerns.

Samantha Ann views spirituality as contributing to the counseling process in acceptance and non-judgment, explaining that part of her spirituality is seeing the pain and having compassion rather than trying to judge. She also tries to help clients to make peace with themselves and cultivate compassion for themselves. She believes that spirituality contributes in being present to the client. Likewise, it can foster creative problem-solving. Samantha Ann encourages clients to create their own rituals and to use art and music in expressing their spirituality. She also uses imagery, non-dominant hand journaling, metaphor and symbolism, meeting the needs of clients who resonate with interventions outside of talk therapy. She also uses nature as a means of connecting with spirituality through being present and feeling connectedness to a greater whole. She draws on spirituality in helping clients move from an either/or way of thinking to a both/and perspective. She believes that when there is mutual openness, with both client and counselor being open to spirit in the therapy relationship, spirituality has more energy and power.

Samantha Ann believes in helping clients to integrate being a human person and a spiritual person. She tries to help clients see the difference between what they have been taught as a religious value and what might be true for them. She sees this as particularly salient when working with LGBT clients who have been raised in oppressive environments, as well as with others who find themselves at odds with the religious doctrine they were taught as children, helping them to let go of some of the messages that were part of their religious upbringings while still having a sense of connectedness. Samantha Ann believes that spirituality increases hope, opening a source of strength for clients. She connects giving meaning to things as helping to foster hope, which then facilitates progress in therapy. Spirituality provides healing insights for both Samantha Ann and her clients. She provides a safe place to talk about spiritual issues, which opens the door to deeper sharing, and stays in place and present for her clients. Samantha Ann also connects spirituality with self-care in the sense of being responsible for oneself, including the role each person plays in healing themselves and in healing their relationship with God. Samantha Ann has had experiences of being given strength outside of her own ability, paying attention and words coming into her head of what to say, although not thinking of them consciously. She describes this as difficult to explain but powerful when it occurs.