

DISSERTATION

SPIRITUALITY AND ATHEIST SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS:
CONTRIBUTIONS FOR CURRICULUM CONTENT ON SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT

SPIRITUALITY AND ATHEIST SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: CONTRIBUTIONS FOR CURRICULUM CONTENT ON SPIRITUALITY

The purpose of this constructivist study was to gain information about a criterion sample of atheist social work students concerning their experiences and perspectives of spirituality and curriculum content on spirituality. Most of the twenty-two participants formed their atheist worldviews against the tide of a religious upbringing, primarily due to their assessment of a dissonance between their evaluations of reality and religious beliefs. From the findings and the literature, suggestions are made for curriculum content on spirituality: (a) educators should frame worldviews as constructions and treat mystical elements as cultural phenomena; (b) content should have a professional focus with academically appropriate content; (c) curriculum content should be planned around the goal of training social work students to effectively address issues about worldviews in practice; (d) inclusive language and content should be utilized that covers all worldviews, including atheist and other naturalist worldviews; (e) biases, stereotypes, and privilege should be addressed and countered; (f) specific dialogic techniques should be developed for use in the classroom; (g) educators who will teach content on worldviews should have specific training for teaching material on spirituality and worldviews; and (h) a task force should be formed to create guidelines for curriculum content on spirituality.

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To my participants, who freely gave of their personal narratives and perspectives to create with me this offering for curriculum content on spirituality from an atheist perspective. To the forever friends and family of my nomadic life, who make my life rich and full. Thank you for your support and love.

DEDICATION

For my partner Kate for her love, support, patience, humor, and the sacrifice of precious time together while my attention was focused on academic work.

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LIST OF KEYWORDS

Spirituality, religion, worldview, atheism, social work education, difficult dialogues, curriculum development, constructivist research.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study resulted from the researcher's curiosity about the experiences and perceptions of atheist social work students regarding spirituality and curriculum content on spirituality. A cursory review of the literature revealed that the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated and who identify as atheists or agnostics is rapidly increasing, yet it seems that much of the social work literature on spirituality has a focus on religious and other supernatural frameworks. This study explored the perspectives of a sample of atheist social work students about spirituality and course content on spirituality. There seems to be a dearth of information about atheist social work students in the current literature (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). This chapter contains information about spirituality and social work, atheism, the research problem and purpose, and the research questions.

Professional social work organizations note that religion and spirituality are important individual and sociocultural phenomena likely to be encountered in social work practice (National Association of Social Workers, 2007, 2008). The Council on Social Work Education (2015) and the National Association of Social Workers (2007, 2008) recommend that content on spirituality be included in the curriculum to prepare social work students for practice in this area (Hodge & McGrew, 2006). Efforts to include spirituality in social work education seem to focus on theistic and supernaturalist frameworks of spirituality to the exclusion of atheist perspectives (Senreich, 2013).

The purpose of curriculum content on spirituality in social work education is to prepare students to address issues that may come up with their clients on the subject of spirituality (Ai, 2002). To prepare students to manage spiritual issues with their clients, illuminating spirituality and worldviews as they are likely to appear in practice settings seems of primary importance. It seems important, therefore, to examine what is known about spiritual perspectives as they appear in the United States in religious, other supernatural, non-religious, and atheist forms.

The United States is a highly religious nation with about 80% of its citizens identifying as 'moderately' to 'very' religious (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). Most of those holding religious beliefs

are of the Christian religion (Pew Research, 2012b). Almost 5% of Americans identify as affiliated with religions other than Christianity, including Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism. When the question of belief in God is framed using broader terms like ‘higher power’ the percentage of those holding theistic beliefs rises to 90% (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). Theism refers to a belief that a God or higher power exists and is active in the world (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010).

From an extensive study of the religious landscape of the United States conducted in 2015, the percentage of Americans who identify themselves as atheist, agnostic, or ‘nothing in particular’ is 22.8% (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Identifying as nonreligious or ‘nothing in particular’ does not equate to not believing in some kind of god or higher power. The unaffiliated group still exhibits a high degree of religious and supernatural beliefs. Sixty-eight percent of the unaffiliated report they believe in some kind of higher power, 21% pray daily, and 37% describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ (Pew Research Center, 2012b). There are higher percentages of younger Americans who have no affiliation with a religion. Thirty-five percent of Millennials identify as atheist, agnostic, or unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2010). According to two large polls conducted in 2012, 83% of Americans claimed some kind of religious affiliation (Pew Research, 2012b; WIN-Gallup International, 2012). This percentage went down to 70.6% in just a few years (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Religion has been described as a subset of spirituality that is characterized by specific beliefs and practices within a community (Dobbelaire, 2011). While religious affiliation and identification are regularly captured in surveys (Pew Research, 2012; WIN-Gallup International, 2012), information about spiritual identification is difficult to obtain, in part because spirituality is a broad and multidimensional construct (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Schlehofer, Omoto, & Adelman, 2008) about which there is no consensus (Holloway & Moss, 2010; Paley, 2007). Religious denominations have membership rolls that provide the numbers for those who have formally joined a particular Christian church. The number of those who identify as unaffiliated with any particular religion is the fastest growing group that appears in research about religious beliefs (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Even though most people associate spirituality with belief in some kind of higher power or transcendent realm (Bloom, 2011; Ecklund & Long, 2011; Rovers & Kocum, 2010), some conceptualizations of spirituality may not contain any theistic or supernatural elements. For example, certain existential concerns may be framed as spiritual issues (Ai, 2002; Hill et al., 2000; MacDonald, 2009; Paley, 2007). Some religions—including Taoism and Buddhism—usually contain no theistic elements. It can be difficult to differentiate between spiritual and existential matters when theistic and supernatural elements are removed (McSherry & Jamieson, 2011; Paley, 2007; Paley, 2008b). Hoyt (2008) recommends that only those things that are concerned with supernatural beliefs about higher powers and transcendent realms should be called ‘spiritual.’

The wide variety of spiritual constructs (Paley, 2007), the lack of consensus on its meaning (Holloway & Moss, 2010), and their complex and multidimensional nature (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Schlehofer et al., 2008) provide significant barriers to devising a consistent framework for teaching about spirituality in the social work curriculum. Within the ongoing discourse about the meaning of spirituality and how it should be applied to education and practice in various fields, definitions of spirituality have become so broad and varied that spirituality has been described by Paley as a kind of “conceptual sponge” (2008a, p. 5).

Professionals in the social services have debated for decades about the nature of spirituality, attempting to develop a consensus about its common components and factors. Despite sincere and scholarly efforts, this exercise has resulted not in consensus but in a wider variety of constructs about spirituality (Berry, 2005). Some researchers have attempted to devise measures or scales of spirituality (LaBouff, Johnson, Tsang, Rowatt, & Thedford, 2010; MacDonald, 2000; MacDonald, 2009) in order to provide some agreement for discussion, education, and practice. However, no attempted formulation of common features can capture the complexity and variability of human constructs of spirituality, nor is it likely they will (Bash, 2004; Berry, 2005).

Spirituality is most often associated with theistic beliefs (Durkheim, 1912/1954; Ecklund & Long, 2011; Neff, 2006; Pargament & Saunders, 2007) and belief in some kind of supernatural or

transcendent realm (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; Rice, 2003; Rothman, 2009). The underlying religious and supernatural connotations of spirituality are retained in its linkage to the root word ‘spirit’ (Caldwell-Harris, et al., 2011; Hwang, Hammer & Cragun, 2011), which can refer to nonphysical aspects of humans or to supernatural beings. Supernatural formulations are common in the literature on spirituality. For instance, Anandarajah (2008) proposes incorporating into practice a model of the human being that is comprised of three distinct parts—the body, the mind, and the spirit. Anandarajah’s formulation is reminiscent of Plato’s *The Republic* (trans. 2000) in which Plato designated three parts of the human soul: that comprising cardinal appetites and needs, that which has to do with reason, and a spirit in which higher qualities reside.

The current focus on theistic and supernatural perspectives (Berry, 2005; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Helminiak, 2008; Paley, 2010) in the dialogue on spirituality does not readily take into account the fact that about 23% of the American population holds worldviews outside the realm of traditional religious and spiritual worldviews (Pew Research, 2015). The fastest growing religious designation in the United States is the population of those who identify as nonreligious, unaffiliated, agnostic, or atheist (Cheyne, 2010). Since some who identify as religious do not believe in the tenets of their religion (Cheyne, 2010; Dennett & LaScola, 2010), the percentage of those who identify as nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist is probably higher than indicated by recent surveys (Pew Research Religious Public Life Project, 2012a; Pew Research, 2015; WIN-Gallup International, 2012). These religiously identified nonbelievers are sometimes referred to as the “culturally religious” (Zuckerman, 2008, p. 163). The existence of nonbelievers who identify as religious has been overlooked in discussions about the extent of religiosity in populations (p. 165). The lack of discussion about nonbelievers is also reflected in the college curriculum (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Hoyt, 2008).

More than a quarter of American adults report they have left the religion in which they were raised (Pew Research, 2012b). The Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) indicated a decrease of 10% in the number of persons identifying as Christian since 1990. The percentage of Americans who identified as Christian went down from 78% in 2007 to 70% in 2014 (Pew Research

Center, 2015a). The presence of growing numbers of people who identify as unaffiliated, agnostic, and atheist (Cheyne, 2010; Skirbeck, Goujon, & Kaufman, 2010; WIN-Gallup International, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015a) has significant implications for a curriculum that often assumes religiosity or spirituality is a universal human concern (Hay & Socha, 2005; Paley, 2007; Rovers & Kocum, 2010).

Paley (2007) notes that definitions of spirituality have broadened from an early focus on religions and now comprise a continuum from religious faith to individual spiritualities to such things as an appreciation of art and music. This expansion of the definition of spirituality makes it possible to describe everyone as being spiritual or as having spiritual needs (p. 179). An assumption of the universality of religious and spiritual beliefs and concerns is reflected in the literature (Hay & Socha, 2005; Paley, 2007; Rovers & Kocum, 2010). The existence of nations that are predominantly secular (Zuckerman, 2008) and the growing percentage of people who are atheists (WIN-Gallup International, 2012) refutes the idea that theistic and supernatural beliefs are universal.

In contrast to the idea of universal interest in and need for spirituality, research on atheists indicates that theistic and supernatural beliefs are not included in their perspectives of reality (Baker & Smith, 2009; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Hwang et al., 2011). Atheism refers to the lack of belief in God, gods, or a higher power (Cliteur, 2009). Atheists also tend to lack belief in the existence of a transcendent or supernatural realm (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007).

Naturalism is virtually identical to atheism in that it consists of the idea that no supernatural realm or beings exist and that all things can be explained by scientific laws (Oxford Online Dictionary, n.d.). These findings indicate that some of the basic ideas about spirituality currently being taught in the curriculum may not apply to a growing population of atheists, agnostics, and religiously unaffiliated people. Atheists tend to eschew some of the most-mentioned components of spirituality in the literature, including the idea of supernatural beings and realms and the idea that humans must search for some ultimate purpose or meaning in life (Russell, 1999; Zuckerman, 2009). Atheists are as concerned about meaning and purpose as are other people (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011), but their philosophy tends to advocate creating one's

own meaning and purpose in life rather than it being imposed externally (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Hwang et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 2009).

Problem Statement

The perceived problem driving the original inquiry was that while current social work curriculum content on spirituality focuses on religious and other supernatural frameworks of spirituality (Senreich, 2013), there is a growing population that holds nonreligious and atheist perspectives (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Skirbeck et al., 2010; WIN-Gallup International, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015a), as well as those who identify as 'spiritual but not religious' (Ai, 2002). Little is known about atheists and their views about spirituality (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011) and the perspectives and experiences of atheist students have not been sought (Moore & Leach, 2015). All accredited schools of social work are required to include curriculum content on spirituality as part of cultural competency standards (Moss, 2011).

The gap in research on atheists and atheism (Hwang et al., 2011; Smith-Stoner, 2007) is illustrated by a literature search conducted in December 2014 that revealed that the following social work journals contained no articles on atheism: *Social Work*, *Social Work Research*, *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, *British Journal of Social Work*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Research on Social Work Practice*, *Health and Social Work*, *Social Work in Health Care*, *Journal of Social Service Research*, *International Social Work*, and *Clinical Social Work Journal*. As a result of a lack of awareness and information about atheists, the current curriculum may not be preparing social workers to address their particular needs.

Purpose Statement

This study explored the perspectives and experiences of a sample of atheist social work students about spirituality. It can be expected that knowledge of this increasing population (WIN-Gallup International, 2012) can contribute to better preparing social workers to address spirituality with clients who hold religious or spiritual beliefs as well as those who hold nonreligious or atheist perspectives (Gilligan & Furness, 2006). A sample of atheist social work students was interviewed with the purpose of obtaining data that could inform the social work curriculum about atheist perspectives on spirituality.

Significance of the Study

Spirituality in social work education. The relationship of social work to spirituality has changed over time and currently appears to be undergoing another period of transition. The social work profession arose from religious and spiritual ideals of service to the poor (Trattner, 1999) within the context of a culture that was predominantly Christian (Holloway & Moss, 2010). The first social work field settings in the nineteenth century were religious charity organizations (Zastrow, 2013). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the social work profession distanced itself from religion in the effort to become a legitimate profession (Holloway & Moss). Socialist and democratic ideals of equality and freedom began to take precedence over the religious values that had informed early social work practice (Day, 1997). By the middle of the twentieth century social work education and practice had become almost completely secular (Holloway & Moss, 2010).

Spirituality remained marginalized as a topic for social work education until the late 1980s (Holloway & Moss, 2010). Change was prompted by a discrepancy between the dearth of material on spirituality in social work education and practice and the predominance of religious and spiritual worldviews among clients (Siporin, 1985). Canda (1989) advocated for the inclusion of spirituality in social work education as an area of human diversity. Religious organizations began to receive funding from government agencies as religiously-based agencies filled the gap left from government funding cuts in the 1980s and 1990s (Sherr, Singletary, & Rogers, 2009). Political influences from feminist and racial equality movements resulted in a focus on diversity and tolerance that indirectly led to the acceptance of theistic and supernatural frameworks as appropriate for discussion (Ai, 2002).

Several developments contribute to the need for new understandings of spirituality for practice. Increased immigration and the development of a global community (Edgell et al., 2006), a changing focus from religious beliefs to personal spiritualities (Gray, 2008), and the increasing diversity of religions, spiritualities, and naturalist worldviews (Ai, 2002) require sensitivity and knowledge of a wider spectrum of worldviews than at perhaps any previous time in history. The changing nature of human spirituality and the development of alternative spiritualities (Skirbeck et al., 2010) require new responses from the

helping professions. The growing number of atheists (WIN-Gallup International, 2012), ‘nones’ (Cheyne, 2010), and those holding non-traditional spiritual worldviews (Schlehofer et al., 2008) presents challenges to a curriculum that places its focus on traditional religious and spiritual formulations (MacDonald, 2009; McSherry & Jamieson, 2011).

Atheist contributions. A study on atheist perspectives is timely within the context of the need for new perspectives of spirituality in social work education and practice. Atheist perspectives have been mentioned in the literature but have not been discussed as significant aspects of human diversity (Mueller, 2012). It is important to acknowledge the existence of a growing number of people who identify as non-religious and as having non-supernaturally-based worldviews (Edgell et al., 2006; Hwang et al., 2011; Lyn, Harvey, & Nyborg, 2008). This study contributes to knowledge about the perspectives of a growing, yet neglected group of people.

One of the major challenges of addressing religion and spirituality in the field of social work is that the subject matter can create emotional reactivity and is laden with possibilities for misunderstanding and offense (Becker, 2009). Dialogue about diverse worldviews can promote the skills necessary to handle the often sensitive topic of spirituality (Crook-Lyon, O’Grady, Smith, Jensen, Golightly, & Potkar, 2012, p. 179). Students need to be prepared to interact effectively with clients who hold worldviews significantly different from their own (Northcut, 2004). Initiating classroom conversations about a variety of spiritualities and worldviews that move beyond traditional religious perspectives can provide social work students with opportunities to explore and practice the interaction of their worldview with those of their clients (p. 352).

This research contained two main goals. The first was that of acquiring understanding of the experience of spirituality held by a sample of atheist social work students. The second purpose of this study was to find out what kind of contributions a group of atheist social work students could bring to the discussion of curriculum content on spirituality. Contributions will be gleaned from the data as they are synthesized with information from the literature in an analytic process.

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study were: (a) What kind of conceptualizations and experiences does a sample of atheist university social work students hold about spirituality and about curriculum content on spirituality?; and (b) How might their experiences and conceptualizations contribute to curriculum content on spirituality?

Interview questions concerned (a) participants' ideas of spirituality; (b) whether they considered themselves spiritual in some way; (c) how their worldview changed if they once held a theistic or supernatural position; (d) if and how their worldview provided particular challenges; (e) the extent that participants are open about their worldviews; (f) their experience with current curriculum content on spirituality and atheism; and (g) their ideas about what they find helpful or problematic in curriculum content on spirituality. Interview questions can be found in "Appendix B: Participant Questionnaire." Additional questions were asked of clients during the process of interviewing them.

Definition of Terms

Due to the constructed nature of religion and spirituality, definitions of related terms constantly change and evolve (Ponterotto, 2005). The following definitions of terms provide a guideline for understanding how the terms are utilized within this study.

Atheism. The term 'atheism' refers to the lack of belief in the existence of deities or higher powers (Cliteur, 2009; Soria, Lepkowski, & Weiner, 2013) and usually includes lack of belief in any kind of supernatural or transcendent realm (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). The term 'atheist' can be viewed as a negatively-framed definition about what is *not* believed and is associated with a number of negative stereotypes (Harper, 2007). Due to bias against atheists, some who fit the criteria for atheism prefer either to not use the term or to keep their worldview hidden (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Fitzgerald, 2003). The participants of this study responded to an invitation that primarily used the word 'atheist' with other identifiers such as 'naturalist' and 'agnostic.' The words 'atheist' and 'naturalist' were used extensively when describing participants and their worldviews, although participants also described themselves as agnostics, naturalists or a combination of these three terms.

Agnosticism. The word ‘agnosticism’ was coined by Thomas H. Huxley to describe an epistemological position of uncertainty about conclusions that cannot be demonstrated (Smart, 2011). The classical definition of agnosticism is a position that the existence of God can neither be proved nor disproved (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013).

Naturalism. Naturalism is a worldview in which all things arise from and can be explained by natural causes and that excludes the supernatural (Forrest, 2000). Grayling (2007) suggests that ‘naturalist’ is a more appropriate term than ‘atheist’ because rather than signifying a lack of belief, it describes what naturalists hold to be true, which is that “the universe is a natural realm, governed by nature’s laws” (p. 28). The term ‘naturalist’ or ‘naturalism’ is used throughout the study to describe a worldview that does not contain belief in deities or the supernatural.

Religion. Within this study, the definition of religion is a system of beliefs that usually includes belief in supernatural being(s) within some kind of community holding formal beliefs, customs, and rituals (Dobbelaere, 2011; Worthington, Hook, Davis, & McDaniel, 2010).

Spirituality. Spirituality is considered a broader term than religion and encompasses a range of religious beliefs, beliefs in a higher power, folk beliefs such as ‘everything happens for a reason’ (Chaitin, 2006), a supernatural or transcendent realm beyond the natural (Flynn, 2009; Hodge, 2006), the sacred (Demerath, 1999; Dobbelaere, 2011; Hill et al., 2000) and/or meaning and purpose in life (Crisp, 2008; Edwards, Pang, Shiu, & Chan, 2010; Rovers & Kocum, 2010).

Despite great variation across human cultures, commonalities exist in the manner in which certain experiences may be attributed to spiritual entities and transcendent realms (Durkheim, 1912/1954). For the purposes of this study, spirituality is considered a human construct arising from a complex interplay of psychological, biological, sociocultural, and neurological factors that are unique to humans (Pyysiäinen, 2010, 2012). These complex processes make the supernatural seem likely, are reinforced by sociocultural influences, and then give rise to spiritual beliefs and practices (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf & Saunders, 1988; Hay & Socha, 2005; Pyysiäinen, 2010; Tremlin, 2006). The similarity of various

manifestations and perspectives of spirituality suggests there may be underlying phenomena that form the basis for religious and spiritual worldviews (Elkins et al, 1988; Pyysiäinen, 2001; Tremlin, 2006).

Supernatural. The word ‘supernatural’ refers to that which is beyond natural law or scientific explanation (Oxford, n.d.). As such, concepts about God or gods, higher powers, and transcendent realms can readily be included in the term ‘supernatural.’ MacDonald’s Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (ESI)—which was constructed from 19 different measures of spirituality—included a dimension of the supernatural that included God or gods and belief in a transcendent realm (2009), supporting the use of the term ‘supernatural’ in reference to gods, religious beliefs, higher powers, and/or transcendent realms.

Worldview. Worldview refers to the overall framework with which an individual makes sense of reality (Huang & Shih, 2011; Schilders, Sloep, Peled, & Boersma, 2009). A worldview can range from a specific religious belief system to an individualized spirituality or a life philosophy.

Limitations of the Study

The intent of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of a sample of atheist university social work students in order to inform the social work curriculum on spirituality. The study was limited to a sample of social work students from two social work departments in the western United States and is not expected to be representative of the perspectives of all atheist social work students (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011). Since the two universities from which participants were gleaned are small state universities in the western United States, students who attend these universities may differ from those who attend universities of other types or from other areas of the country. Participants were primarily Caucasian females, consistent with the fact that 82% of social workers are female (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

The researcher holds a worldview that can best be described as naturalist. It was understood and expected in constructivist research that my personal perspectives would have an influence on the research (Chenail, 2011). My own experiences and perspectives also positioned me well for the study as one who shares the lived experience of my participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I attempted to represent the experiences and perspectives of my participants as authentically as possible (Maxwell, 1996).

Delimitations of the Study

Atheist social work students were chosen as participants because an initial literature search found very little information about atheist students and nothing about their views of spirituality. Given that atheists lack a belief in gods and supernatural realms (Goodman & Mueller, 2009), the researcher wondered how their unique perspectives could contribute to the discussion about what to include in curriculum content on spirituality and how best to teach it. A constructivist paradigm was chosen because spirituality can best be described for academic purposes as a human construct arising from an interplay of sociocultural, neurological, and psychological factors (Pyysiäinen, 2012). Because the study was exploratory, methodological tools were chosen that would elicit rich material and allow for the exploration of unexpected themes.

Social work educators were not included in the participation invitations because it quickly became clear that this would require casting a far greater net than was possible given the limited resources available for this dissertation. It made sense to limit the participation invitations to two social work departments in the American West for reasons of time, the particular needs of dissertation research, and because rich qualitative data was sought that did not require a large or randomized sample.

Because constructivist inquiry involves creating meaning out of the interactions between the participants and the researcher (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), an interactive interview format was considered appropriate. I chose email interviews because research indicates such interviews can be more focused, rich, and reflective than in-person interviews (Meho & Tibbo, 2003; Murray & Harrison, 2004). Part of the reason for the richness of email interviewing is that this type of interview gives the participants and researcher time to formulate responses and provide rich material for analysis (Murray, 2004). I sent the same set of open-ended interview questions to every participant to ensure that I would get responses about key phenomena I wished to explore. The initial interview questions can be found in “Appendix B: Participant Questionnaire.” After receiving each participant’s initial response I asked further questions to clarify and explore new topics that arose. I continued responding to participants’ emails for as long as each participant wished to continue.

Summary

The social work profession has responded to an increased interest in spirituality as an element of cultural competence. Knowledge about spirituality is included in the requirements for competency in social work practice (NASW, 2007). Holloway and Moss (2010) describe the challenge presented to curriculum content on spirituality as the need to develop course content that has effective and appropriate application to the needs of social work practice. The increasing number of persons holding nontheist worldviews (WIN-Gallup International, 2012) and the lack of attention to and training about the needs of atheist and other nonreligious clients presents a challenge for curriculum content on spirituality to develop effective means to address spirituality and worldviews with clients of all worldview perspectives.

There has been much debate about what constitutes spirituality, and it has been framed using a range of religious, spiritual, and existential perspectives (Paley, 2010). Whatever else it may be, spirituality and worldviews are multidimensional human phenomena and motivations that are important matters for social work concerns about well-being and wholeness (Pargament, 2013b). The intent of this study was twofold: (a) to provide information about a sample of atheist social work students about their perspectives and experiences of spirituality and curriculum content on spirituality in social work education, and (b) to provide material that can inform the dialogue about curriculum content on spirituality in social work education.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to investigate the current literature on spirituality, atheism, and social work in order to provide a framework with which to formulate the direction of the study. The vastness of the literature required narrowing down the focus to fit the inquiry at hand (Randolph, 2009). Both the purpose of my study (to investigate the experiences and perspectives of atheist social workers about spirituality and curriculum content on spirituality), and the paradigm I chose for the study (constructivism) directed my choice of literature (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). I sought to identify central issues and gaps in the literature pertinent to curriculum content on spirituality and to atheism and atheist students.

Literature was investigated through a constructivist lens. A considerable amount of literature exists that approaches spirituality from its supernatural or mystical perspectives, but for the purposes of this study, spirituality is considered a human construct developed through an interaction of social and individual constructions of reality (Voelker, 2011) that are influenced by neurological, biological and psychological factors (Magee & Hardin, 2010).

Types of information that were sought from the literature included articles about (a) the demographics and characteristics of atheists; (b) current conceptualizations of religion and spirituality in social work and related professions; (c) current formulations of spirituality; (d) relevant research on religion and spirituality from atheist and scientific perspectives; (e) current requirements and recommendations for competence in spirituality within social work; (f) information about current curriculum content on spirituality; and (g) atheist perspectives about spirituality. Key points from the literature are explicated in the following sections.

Religion and Spirituality

It could be stated that there are two basic overriding human perspectives about spirituality. One—held by approximately six of the seven billion people currently living on earth (Epstein, 2009)—is that spirituality exists because a higher power and/or a supernatural or transcendent realm exists, with

spirituality representing interactions between humanity and the divine or transcendent. The other perspective is that religious and spiritual beliefs arise from a combination of cultural, psychological, evolutionary, cognitive, and biological influences unique to humans that give rise to spiritual beliefs and practices (Hay & Socha, 2005; Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010; Tremlin, 2006). The latter perspective is shared by 13% of the world population, or roughly one billion people (WIN-Gallup International, 2012).

In the United States about 90% of Americans believe in God or some kind of higher power (WIN-Gallup International, 2012), with some 70% of them believing in a personal God (Pew Research Center, 2015a). The United States has a high degree of religiosity, with most people identifying as Christian and others identifying with other religions and spiritual beliefs (Crockett & Voas, 2006; Skirbeck et al., 2010). The Pew Research Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Research, 2015) reported the following demographics for religious beliefs in the United States (given by percentage):

Christian	70.6
Jewish	1.9
Buddhist	0.7
Islam	0.9
Hindu	0.7
Other religion	1.5
Unaffiliated	22.8 (atheist 3.1, agnostic 4.0, “nothing in particular” 15.8, “don’t know” 0.6)

Fifteen percent of Americans identify themselves as “nones” (Cheyne, 2010), which is the same designation as “unaffiliated” in the Pew Research surveys of 2012 (Pew Research, 2012a; Pew Research, 2012b). The term ‘nones’ comes from the designation ‘none’ in questionnaires about religious affiliation. A response of ‘none’ can indicate a rejection of theistic beliefs or may simply refer to a rejection of the religions that were available to choose from on a given survey (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012). It should be noted that ‘none’ does not necessarily indicate a lack of belief in gods or the supernatural; a majority (68%) of those who identify as ‘none’ hold belief in some kind of god or universal spirit (Pew Research, 2012b). ‘Nones’ hold a slightly higher percentage of belief in the

following supernatural beliefs than does the general American public: astrology (25%), belief that one has communicated with someone who is dead (31%), and belief that there is some kind of ‘spiritual energy’ contained within physical objects (30%) (Pew Research, 2012b).

The designation ‘none’ includes the religiously unaffiliated, those calling themselves ‘spiritual but not religious,’ agnostics, and atheists (Cheyne, 2010). It is the fastest growing group in the United States, moving from 5% of the population in the General Social Survey of 1972 to 20% in the same survey that was repeated in 2012 (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2013). In the 2000 General Social Survey 3% of Americans affirmed having no belief in God or a higher power (Edgell et al., 2006). An additional 4% endorsed agnosticism, noting there is no way to know if there is a God or higher power (Edgell et al., 2006; Pew Research, 2012b). The percentages of atheists and agnostics in the United States remain the same, according to the Pew Research Center poll entitled “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (2015a). The percentage of atheists worldwide is much higher than that of the United States, with 13% identifying as “convinced atheists” (WIN-Gallup International Global Index, 2012, p. 2). The United States is considered a highly religious nation (Epstein, 2009).

The Pew Center Religion and Public Life Survey (2015) found that 70.6% of Americans identify as Christian. Six percent report an affiliation with other religions. The percentage of Americans who believe in God or a universal spirit was 91% in 2012 (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). The WIN-Gallup International poll (2012) reports that 60% of Americans describe themselves as religious people, 30% as nonreligious people, and 5% as atheists. In addition, many people are nominally religious but increasingly indifferent to the dogmas that were once considered foundational to their religious communities (Cheyne, 2010; Dennett & LaScola, 2010). Some 77% of Americans claim some kind of religious affiliation, and among the ‘nones’ are some who identify with a spiritual worldview that is not associated with any specific religion (WIN-Gallup International, 2012).

Religion and spirituality worldwide. Religious pluralism is increasing around the world due to immigration and globalization (Crockett & Voas, 2006; Edgell et al., 2006; Skirbeck et al., 2010). Alternative forms of spirituality and religion are proliferating (Edgell et al., 2006; Saraglou & Muñoz-

García, 2008). The WIN-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012) included 51,000 participants from 57 nations. The poll reported that 59% of their participants identified as religious persons, 23% as nonreligious, and 13% as “convinced atheists” (p. 2). The Global Religious Landscape Project by Pew Research (2012a) gathered information from 230 countries and territories utilizing some 2,500 censuses, population registries, and surveys to obtain the following worldwide religious demographics (given in percentages):

Christian	32
Muslim	23
Unaffiliated	16
Hindu	15
Buddhist	7
Jewish	0.2
Folk/traditional	6
Other	1 (Sikh, Taoist, Baha’i, Wiccan, etc.)

The unaffiliated include those who are not affiliated with any religion, agnostics, atheists, and those who call themselves ‘spiritual but not religious’ (Pew Research, 2012a). Figure 1 illustrates the high percentage of Americans who believe in God or a higher power compared to the percentage of “nones” and the percentage of atheists in the United States.

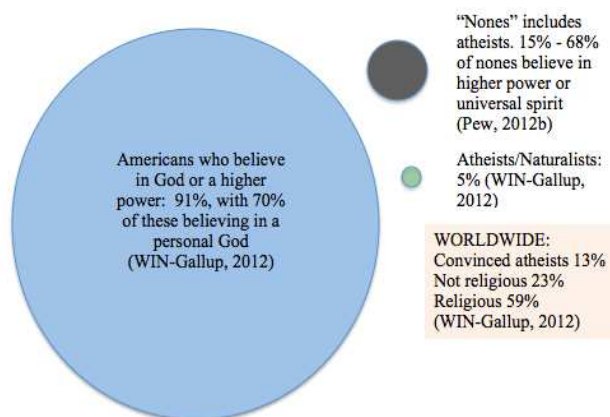


Figure 1. Demographics of belief in the United States (circle sizes correspond to percentages).

Secularization. The WIN-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012) found that thirteen percent of the world's population identifies as "convinced atheists," which is the wording used in the survey (p. 2). The United States is considered a unique exception among the developed nations in that while the more economically and academically advanced nations are generally becoming more secular, most Americans report some kind of religious affiliation (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). However, even in the highly religious United States, about one in five persons considers themselves nonreligious (Epstein, 2009). The Millennial cohort of adult Americans reports less involvement with religious organizations than reported by members of earlier generations (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2010). The number of persons reporting no religious affiliation doubled in twenty years (Schwadel, 2010). It seems likely that these trends will continue into the indefinite future (Skirbeck et al., 2010).

Differentiating between religion and spirituality. The idea that a supernatural realm is dynamic and influential in the natural world is the essential foundation of religion (Durkheim, 1912/1954). Religious institutions and traditions are built around a fundamental belief in supernatural beings (Sjöblom, 2007). These purported beings may include demons, angels, God or gods (or 'higher powers'), as well as persons who have died but who continue to interact with the natural world (Boyer, 2008). While religion is generally considered to include theism of some kind, some systems that are considered religious most often do not contain theistic ideas, including Buddhism and Taoism (Davis, 2005).

The word spirituality comes from the root word 'spirit,' or 'breath of life' (Elkins et al., 1988), implying a connection with something essential (Derezotes, 1995). The word 'religion' comes from the Latin root 'religio' and has to do with a connection between humans and a higher power (Hill et al., 2000). Both religion and spirituality are associated with theistic beliefs and ideas of the sacred (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Theistic beliefs currently range from very specific beliefs in God or gods within a religious faith; through the designation 'spiritual but not religious' that usually retains a belief in some kind of higher power; and on through ever vaguer conceptualizations such as "integrative energy" or "ultimate reality" (Paley, 2007, p. 179).

According to Hill et al. (2000), spirituality meant essentially the same thing as religion until the last century (Paley, 2007). Spirituality is now generally differentiated from religion in the literature, with religion associated with institutionalized beliefs and practices (Dobbelaere, 2011; Worthington et al., 2010) within specific communities of believers (Bellah, 2008; Canda, 2008). Spirituality generally pertains to ideas about having a personal relationship with a god or higher power or with ‘the sacred’ (Hodge & Bushfield, 2007; MacDonald, 2000; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Spirituality is also associated with mysticism, experiences of transcendence, and individualized formulations of spirituality (Ai, 2002). Schlehofer et al. (2008) found some overlap in their participants’ conceptualizations of religion and spirituality, particularly in the area of belief in God or a higher power and the search for the sacred. Religion seems to be associated with community and guidance for daily life while spirituality is connected to abstract ideas of relationship with the sacred (Schlehofer et al., 2008).

Spiritual perspectives sometimes take the form of a set worldview but are often considered a phenomenon that develops throughout the lifespan (Helminiak, 2008). Religion, on the other hand, involves a set of beliefs that are usually considered to be true and unalterable (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005). Religion is often more easily defined than spirituality (Schlehofer et al., 2008), which is considered a broader concept under which religion may be subsumed (Canda, 1997; Hill et al., 2000; King, 2006; Reimer-Kirkham & Sharma, 2012). Religion and spirituality are both usually concerned with beliefs about the supernatural (Bloom, 2011; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Religion is differentiated from spirituality in that it involves not only belief in a higher power or transcendent realm but also a specific set of beliefs and practices within some kind of community (Dobbelaere, 2011). Many people consider themselves ‘spiritual but not religious,’ meaning they have beliefs which they consider spiritual but do not identify with a particular religion (Ai, 2002; Cook, Breckon, Jay, Renwick, & Walker, 2012). Religions commonly feature a belief in the creation of the world by a higher power, the existence of a soul and an afterlife, and the possibility of events and existences that fall outside of what can be expected in the natural world (Bloom, 2011). Other commonalities of religions include the idea that life is a gift given by a higher power and a mystery that

cannot be understood by humans; therefore, humans must trust the higher power and adhere to certain theistically-designated standards (Kinnier, Kernes, Tribbensee, & Van Puymbroeck, 2003, p. 107).

Some biases exist concerning religion and spirituality. Religion has sometimes been described as rigid and oppressive while spirituality tends to be described using warmer terms associated with mystery, love, and personal growth (Hay & Nye, 2006). Spirituality can be associated with a personal worldview consisting of lofty ideals, human potential, and mystical experiences, while religion is sometimes associated with negativity and institutionalism (Ecklund & Long, 2011; Zinnbauer et al, 1997).

Formulations of spirituality. Spirituality is recognized as a significant factor in human functioning and well-being, a unique human motivation toward what people may call the sacred—a movement towards wholeness and meaning (Pargament, 2013b). This section provides information from the literature about formulations of spirituality that currently inform social work education and practice.

Spirituality as it is commonly understood usually refers to theistic beliefs and/or belief in some kind of supernatural realm (Bloom, 2011; Ecklund & Long, 2011; Hodge, 2006; Neff, 2006; Pargament & Saunders, 2007; Pasquale, 2007; Rovers & Kocum, 2010), yet spirituality can also refer to existential matters, completely leaving off theistic or supernatural elements (Ai, 2002; Hill et al., 2000; MacDonald, 2009). Most conceptualizations of spirituality in the literature reflect a Western or Judeo-Christian perspective (Berry, 2005). Flynn (2009) suggests the term ‘spirituality’ is best understood in the way most people intuitively construct it as having to do with a soul or spirit and supernatural beings. William James was among the first to refer to spirituality using terms broader than its roots in religion (Holloway & Morrow, 2010). In his *Spirituality for Today*, James(1902/2002) referred to spirituality in terms of a search for meaning and significance rather than in solely religious terms. In doing so he began a process that is continuing today of expanding and exploring the meaning of spirituality.

Commonalities in religions and spiritualities. Durkheim (1912/1954) noted there are commonalities in all expressions of religion and spirituality that persist throughout history despite their unique sociocultural manifestations. The same components can be found in religious and spiritual worldviews across cultures, including: (a) a belief in God/gods/a higher power and other supernatural

beings; (b) beliefs about life after death; (c) a belief that natural events can be changed through appealing to supernatural beings or through certain rituals and behaviors; and (d) beliefs in the existence of a transcendent realm that exists beyond that of the natural world (Bloom, 2011; Durkheim, 1912/1954).

Currently the most common referents of spirituality found in the literature seem to be: (a) belief in God or a higher power (Ecklund & Long, 2011; Neff, 2006; Pargament & Saunders, 2007); (b) the existence of some kind of supernatural or transcendent realm (Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; Rice, 2003; Rothman, 2009); (c) the sacred or a search for the sacred (Demerath, 1999; Dobbelaere, 2011; Hill et al., 2000) and (d) the need or search for meaning and purpose in life (Crisp, 2008; Edwards et al., 2010; Rovers & Kocum, 2010).

Nonreligious spiritualities. A growing number of individuals who consider themselves ‘spiritual but not religious’ find old formulations of spirituality inadequate and seek new individualized forms (Demerath, 1999). Gray (2008) notes there has been a trend away from formal religion into self-help spiritualities in which individuals seek to find meaning from their own unique formulations of spirituality. New spiritualities in the United States are formed around personal growth, individual experiences, and visions of personal freedom and potential (Ai, 2002).

The American Religious Identification Survey identified 12% of Americans as having worldviews that are deist, New Age, or pantheistic in nature (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). New Age spiritual beliefs form a significant subset of alternative spiritualities (Schlehofer et al., 2008) and center around intuition and mystical experiences, a wide interest in the supernatural, and belief in the ability to communicate with the dead or beings from other planes or galaxies (Rice, 2003; Schlehofer et al., 2008). A common element of the New Age is the freedom to develop one’s own spirituality in an eclectic manner (Ai, 2002). A subset of New Age spirituality is quantum mysticism, which utilizes the language of quantum physics—that is, borrowing verbiage from quantum physics without conformity to its scientific principles—to describe spiritual ‘energies’ and the possibility of creating one’s own reality (Amarasingam, 2009).

Folk spiritualities. Folk spirituality is a common form of spirituality that arises from cultural influences and consists of ideas about the supernatural, luck, jinxing, premonitions, and the like (Yoder, 1974). A high level of folk spirituality exists even in Europe, a region of the world that is much less religious than the United States (Zuckerman, 2008). Folk spiritualities include beliefs in such things as clairvoyance, astrology, and ghosts (Paley, 2010) and involve intuitive ideas of the supernatural that arise naturally in human minds (Barrett, 2007). Ideas about prescience, luck, jinxing, the helpful guidance of departed loved ones, and a god who intervenes in daily life (e.g., helping one find a parking space or preventing rain on the wedding party) are common themes in folk spiritualities (Hutson, 2012).

Humans tend to find these folk spiritualities more compelling than the doctrines of their religions (Tremelin, 2006). In the researcher's fourteen years of experience as a psychotherapist in public mental health, the most common referents to spirituality have been about jinxes, communicating with dead loved ones, premonitions, and various forms of the idea that 'everything happens for reason.' Taking second place to these folk spiritualities, references to religious beliefs usually take the form of something like 'my church/faith is very important to me.'

People use cognitive devices to transform random phenomena into events that have spiritual meaning or purpose for them (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Folk sayings called aphorisms are often used to express full spiritual beliefs in a short phrase easily understood by others in the culture (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, & Hamedani, 2012). One of the most frequently articulated is the belief that 'everything happens for a reason' (Boden, 2015). This idea contains an embedded assumption that a higher power is orchestrating everything whose purpose is unknown but can be trusted (Chaitin, 2006).

That a reason exists for all that happens gives comfort even when no logical reason can be imagined for an event or situation that occurs (Hexem, Mollen, Carroll, Lanctot, & Feudtner, 2011). Ascribing positive consequences or fate (the idea 'it was meant to be') to problematic or baffling events provides humans with the opportunity to create narratives that give these events meaning (Kray et al., 2010, p. 110). Comfort arises from that most basic of spiritual ideas—that a higher power watches over and sustains humanity (Norman, 2006). Spiritually framed sayings (such as the idea that 'everything

happens for a reason’) comprise some of the most common expressions of spirituality (Tremelin, 2006) and seem to function as heuristics that allow individuals to come to satisfying conclusions about events and situations with a minimum of time and cognitive effort (Hexem et al., 2011, p. 43).

Defining spirituality. Spirituality is described by Canda and Furman (2010) as “the search for meaning, purpose, and morally fulfilling relations with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality, however a person understands it” (p. 819). This definition is an oft-quoted one in the literature and is typical of formulations of spirituality that are extremely broad and vague. For instance, the idea that one could have a relationship with an “encompassing universe” that has a spread of some 78 billion light years seems perhaps a bit fantastic (Paley, 2008b, p. 448).

Spirituality includes important affective and cognitive experiences (Dahl & Galliher, 2010). For instance, while transcendence often refers to belief in a realm beyond that of the natural, it can also refer to self-transcendence—that which takes a person beyond their usual experience or beyond the confines of the self (Canda & Furman, 2010; Helminiak, 2008; Howell, 2009). Self-transcendence can involve performing altruistic acts (Epstein, 2009) or responding to art, music, and beauty (Edwards et al., 2010; McSherry & Jamieson, 2011; Norman, 2006).

Spirituality is a multidimensional phenomena that is defined in a multitude of ways. Hill et al. (2000) discuss spirituality as pertaining to the ‘sacred,’ a divine being or principle that transcends the self. For most people ‘the sacred’ refers to God or gods, a higher power, or some kind of reality that transcends the natural (Pargament & Saunders, 2007). However, the sacred can also refer to that which inspires awe and is worthy of respect (Dobbelaere, 2011).

Pargament (1999) points out it is important to consider that the term ‘spirituality’ means various things in different sociocultural contexts. Discourse on spirituality in the literature has come primarily from a Western, Judeo-Christian perspective to the exclusion of other ideas of the divine and spiritual that are found in spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism (Holloway & Moss, 2010). Emmons and Crumpler (1999) recommend including Eastern conceptualizations of spirituality—including nirvana, enlightenment, and oneness—in the discourse on spirituality.

Even within Western cultures the meaning and associations of terms such as ‘spirituality,’ ‘religion,’ ‘believe,’ and ‘secular’ differ widely (Zuckerman, 2008) due to the complex influences of individual life experience and sociocultural differences. Behaviors that are considered spiritual or religious differ across cultures. For instance, in the United States church attendance is associated with religiosity (Dahl & Galliher, 2010) while in Norway church attendance is largely a cultural practice that does not necessarily indicate belief in the tenets of the church (Sorenson, Lien, Holman, & Danbolt, 2013).

Operationalizing spirituality. Canda and Furman (2010) described spirituality as “the ontological ground of existence” (p. 66) in an oft-quoted definition of spirituality. The quotation provides a good example of the ambiguous nature of verbiage about spirituality in the literature (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2008). The study of spirituality is characterized by a lack of consensus on what it means (Holloway and Moss, 2010; Paley, 2007). Spirituality is difficult to define even for individuals who feel their spirituality directs their lives (Schlehofer et al., 2008).

Some social scientists have attempted to formulate operational constructs for spirituality to provide consistency in description and assessment (Berry, 2005; Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). A number of researchers have attempted to contribute to a scientific basis for spiritual assessment by developing common dimensions of spirituality (Haber, Jacob, & Spangler, 2007; King, 2006; LaBouff et al., 2010; MacDonald, 2000; MacDonald, 2009). Some proposed frameworks of spirituality contain only traditional measures of religion, often of Christian derivatives (MacDonald, 2009). Others include multiple dimensions of spirituality that usually include some element of the supernatural or transcendent (Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005).

MacDonald (2000, 2009) conducted a mega-analysis of the literature to formulate his framework for spirituality utilizing 19 extant measures of spirituality to formulate five essential factors of spirituality for the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (ESI): (a) a cognitive orientation toward spirituality, including beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions; (b) an experiential or phenomenological dimension; (c) a dimension of existential well-being including a sense of purpose and self-competence; (d) paranormal or

supernatural beliefs, including belief in God or gods, the afterlife, other supernatural beings and/or a supernatural realm beyond the natural; (e) religiosity, or spirituality expressed through religious practice and belief; and (f) belonging to or identifying with a spiritual community.

Canda and Furman's effort (2010) gleaned the following elements of spirituality: (a) the search for meaning; (b) an essential, sacred element of a person; (c) transcendence beyond the natural or normative; (d) a movement towards wholeness; and (e) participation in certain spiritual practices. Rovers and Kocum (2010) propose an inclusive definition of spirituality that would encompass most religious and spiritual formulations. Their solution proposes three dimensions of spirituality: (a) faith in God or gods, or some transcendent other; (b) hope (existential spirituality about meaning, fulfillment, and purpose in life); and (c) love (some kind of community connection).

King et al. (2006) attempted to develop a standardized measure of spirituality for use in clinical research. Their Beliefs and Values Scale was developed based on narrative research and survey data. The scale relies heavily on traditional religious and spiritual factors. For instance, most of the twenty items in the scale pertain to such things as belief in God, life after death, supernatural beings and forces, and traditional religious practices.

It could be said that a theocentric bias exists in measures of spirituality because nearly all assume belief in some kind of higher power (Berry, 2005). The often used Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982) uses the term God extensively. The Expressions of Spirituality Inventory or ESI (MacDonald, 2000), another prominent scale, substitutes the term higher power, again emphasizing theistic perspectives. Spirituality is generally assumed to be about things of the 'spirit' (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2011). Hoyt (2008) notes an assumption is often made that spirituality is relevant to everyone.

From a constructivist perspective, the quandary about the ontological nature of spirituality is simplified by regarding it as a human construction that will vary greatly among different individuals and cultures. None of the spirituality assessment measurements that have been discussed in this section would be appropriate for the assessment of the spiritual or existential needs of individuals who do not hold

theistic or supernatural worldviews. Many researchers advocate that the most important definition of spirituality is the one each person holds about their own worldview (Bash, 2004; Crisp, 2010; Holloway & Moss, 2010; Paley, 2009).

Research on the foundations of human spirituality. Religions have long been the focus of sociocultural inquiry. The research focus has expanded into inquiry about various foundations for religious and spiritual impulses. It appears that spirituality is not the product solely of individual or social constructions (Voelker, 2011). Neurological and psychological propensities to think in certain ways that result in spiritual, religious, and supernatural interpretations and behaviors have been outlined by a number of scientists (Pyysiäinen, 2012; Tremlin, 2010). Research has investigated aspects of the psychological, physiological, and sociocultural basis of the human search for higher meaning, the sacred, and the transcendent (Barrett, 2007; Zinnbauer et al., 1999).

Individual worldviews are influenced by complex interactions from individual, cultural, familial, personal, neural, evolutionary, and sociological factors (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Magee & Hardin, 2010). Bradshaw & Ellison (2008) see religiosity as the result of both nature and nurture—a biosociocultural phenomenon comprised of the complex interaction of biological, sociological, personal, and cultural factors. According to Pyysiäinen (2012), activity in the human brain makes the supernatural seem likely, a tendency that is reinforced through sociocultural influences. The following sections review significant literature about the investigation of spirituality from a scientific standpoint.

Evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology maintains there is something in the human constitution that makes spiritual beliefs seem likely and causes spiritual interpretations to come naturally to humans (Atran, 2002; Boyer, 2008; Pyysiäinen, 2012). Some evolutionary psychologists believe religion evolved through unique human processes that were optimal for survival and that religious and spiritual beliefs have some adaptive function. For instance, Boyer (2002) theorizes that belief in supernatural agents facilitated the development of reciprocal altruism. Other evolutionary psychologists describe religion and spirituality as spandrels, which are defined as characteristics that are byproducts of adaptive traits but are not themselves adaptations (Bloom, 2011; Brandt, Clément, & Manning, 2010;

Sjöblom, 2007). In other words, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are secondary to adaptive traits that have evolved in humans.

According to evolutionary psychology, two major adaptations contribute to theistic and supernatural beliefs. Patternicity is the tendency to find meaningful patterns even when those patterns are random (Shermer, 2011, p. 60). Humans who could find predictive patterns in the environment were better able to survive in the Paleolithic era because in situations that were ambiguous it was worth it to make Type I errors—to believe there was danger when there was none (Shermer, 2011). Because it was evolutionarily adaptive for humans to make false causal associations in favor of creating those associations that contributed to survival (Reich, 2009), humans retain the tendency to see patterns where there are none. For instance, patternicity explains why humans readily interpret patterns in clouds as faces or living things.

Similarly, agenticity is the human tendency to believe the world is operated upon by intentional agents and to then attribute agency to objects and events even when no such agents are present (Pyysiäinen, 2002; Shermer, 2009; Tremlin, 2006). Agenticity arises from the human ability to make mental representations and to interpret the behaviors of others as arising from mental states that include intents and emotions (Tremlin, 2006). Humans overuse this ability to perceive agenticity and extrapolate intentionality to events that are not orchestrated by an actual agent (Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010). This tendency is thought to be an adaptation that allowed humans to better survive by erring on the side of thinking there were intentional agents even when there might be none. These tendencies contribute to the formation of beliefs in gods and other supernatural beings (Boyer, 2008).

Both agenticity and patternicity are tacit assumptions that human beings universally share across cultures and time (Boyer, 2008; Pyysiäinen, 2012) and that undergird spiritual and religious beliefs. Spiritual beliefs center around supernatural beings such as spirits, angels, and gods. These beings are often called counter-intuitive beings—in order for them to be effective as objects of belief they must have some familiar characteristics coupled with other properties that are beyond the purview of normal

expectations (Tremblin, 2006). The combination of familiar features with some that violate expectations provide particularly memorable, compelling, and durable constructs of these beings (Boyer, 2003).

Humans readily find patterns and impart agency to those patterns, leading to beliefs in the reality of dimensions that “would have to be supernatural to be true” (Hood, 2009, p. xii). Agenticity and patternicity are instinctive and defy rational interpretation. They cause humans to infer “hidden structures, patterns, energies, and dimensions to reality” (Hood, p. 237). From an evolutionary psychology perspective, spirituality is based on physiological, neurological, and psychological predispositions that form the basis of religious beliefs that develop within cultural settings (Hay & Socha, 2005, p. 589). Religious beliefs seem to occur because religious beliefs fit well with human inference mechanisms (Harris, 2010). Thus, a bump in the night becomes a likely ghost, a person becomes angry with an electronic device, gods intervene in the lives of humans, and people come to believe that ‘everything happens for a reason.’

Cognitive science of religion and spirituality. Per research in the cognitive science of religion and spirituality, spirituality can be considered the product of a self-aware mind that developed to solve problems in the environment. The cognitive science of religion and spirituality posits that spiritual or transcendent experiences and constructs arise from neural processes within the brain (Barrett, 2007; Brandt et al., 2010). Because they arise from our own brains they seem intuitively plausible (Boyer, 2008). Religious and spiritual beliefs, intuitions, and processes emerge due to the manner in which our brains process information (Brandt et al.). Humans possess an inherent tendency to think, react, intuit, and behave as if there is some kind of transcendent realm with counterintuitive agents involved (Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010).

Basic assumptions in the cognitive science of religion and spirituality include the ideas that (a) the basic neural processes of healthy human minds are universal; (b) the brain contains complex interacting components; (c) these shape human perceptions of the environment; (d) the makeup of minds “inform and constrain recurrent patterns of human thought” (Barrett, 2007, p. 59); and (e) the brain brings forth spiritual explanations out of these processes. Certain patterns of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors will

occur more often than alternative patterns due to evolved neural components and processes (Barrett, 2007; Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010). These patterns reinforce the idea that supernatural realms and beings are active in the world.

Childhood development provides a window into the way the human mind develops an affinity for the supernatural (Barrett, 2007). Children's minds naturally entertain ideas that are religious in nature, including the idea of life after death and the intentional design of everything (Barrett). Children tend to infer agency where there is none and to see everything as having a purpose (Kelemen, 2004), as in the formulations that "clouds are for raining" and "lions are for going to the zoo" (p. 295). Genetic effects appear to account for nearly half the variation in factors of human religiosity (Bradshaw & Ellison, 2008), 39% of the variation of external religiousness, and 34% of the variation of internal religiousness (Koenig, McGue, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2005).

Technologies such as the fMRI, SPECT, and CAT scan have provided tools for research in the area of the neural sources of various manifestations of human spirituality. Meli and Persinger (2009) conducted experiments in which a sensed presence, 'ego-alien' thoughts, a sense of disconnection from the body, and feelings of transcendence were induced artificially through stimulation of the brain. Practitioners of Zen meditation have been studied using fMRI (Ritskes, Ritskes-Hoitinga, Stødkilde-Jørgensen, Bærentsen, & Hartman, 2003). The researchers found increased activity in the prefrontal cortex and basal ganglia concurrent with decreased activity in the anterior cingulate (an area associated with the will). Specific cognitive operators are heightened during certain religious experiences (Brandt et al., 2010). Newberg, Wintering, Morgan, & Waldman (2006) measured differences in cerebral blood flow during glossolalia (speaking in tongues, a type of prayer in which the participant believes he/she is speaking using a language provided by God which they do not themselves understand) using a SPECT machine. Researchers found significant changes in portions of the brain during transcendent and meditative states in Buddhist monks (Newberg et al., 2001) and prayer in Catholic nuns (Newberg, Pourdehnad, Alavi, & d'Aquili, 2003). Persinger (2001) concluded that transcendent experiences arise from epileptiform seizures with foci in the temporal lobes, particularly in areas of the brain associated

with the emotions. According to Sperber and Hirschfield (2004), normal cognitive processes are overtaken by certain stimuli that provoke religious and transcendental experiences. Religious concepts and activities are said to hijack cognitive resources (as do art and music) because they provide super stimuli to the mind (Boyer, 2008; Sperber, 2004).

Religious and spiritual perceptions cannot be reduced to simple neural functions. The phenomena can be observed, measured, and described by those who are experiencing them, but the underlying ‘thing’ cannot be detected (Bash, 2004). Runehov (2007) points out that what shows up on a SPECT machine hooked up to the brain of “a meditator experiencing Absolute Unitary Being or eating apple pie are pictures of *neurochemistry* and not pictures of *God* or *pie*” (p. 189). In other words, researchers have been able to measure the brain’s reaction to behaviors and thoughts about the supernatural, but not supernatural phenomena themselves.

Sociology of religion and spirituality. The sociology of religion and spirituality examines the sociocultural basis for religious and spiritual beliefs, focusing on social adaptations. One impetus for the development of religion was likely the ability of humans to learn from observing others and communicating in non-verbal ways (Donald, 1999). The development of language resulted in the ability to construct oral traditions and narratives that enhanced cohesion and cooperation (Bellah, 2008) within the small human groups of the Paleolithic era that consisted of from 50 to 150 individuals (Geertz, 1973; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003). Beliefs about being watched by supernatural agents may also limit free riders (those who do not contribute to the community while expecting or needing benefits from the group), extend cooperation and increase prosocial behavior (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011, p. 1191). Rituals—sets of prescribed activities with symbolic significance (Everett, 2008)—increase cohesion, a sense of belonging, and loyalty in human groups (King, 2006).

The development of a shared set of beliefs seems to have provided unity to human groups and a sense of belonging for individuals (Comte-Sponville, 2006). According to Geertz (1973), rituals generated emotions that provided cultural cohesion as well as motivations that contributed to the formulation of conceptualizations about the nature of the world. These conceptualizations interacted with

emotions and motivations and bestowed a sense of plausibility to religious and spiritual ideas (Geertz). Particular sociocultural groups then reinforced the conceptualizations that had arisen, accounting for the promulgation of spiritual worldviews.

Pinker (1997) notes that narrative and myth provide humans with guidance and mental practice for devising strategies they can then use for managing challenges that arise. Wilson (2003) suggests religions developed because they encouraged prosocial behaviors. Societies with higher levels of cooperation were more likely to survive. Religious and spiritual worldviews provided guidance to human communities and membership in a community enhanced individual survival, providing reciprocal reinforcement. Societies that provided for both individual and group needs through religious practices tended to survive and transmit their beliefs to subsequent generations (Kitcher, 2011). Dawkins (1989) describes ‘memes’ as cultural units of transmission that act analogously as genes do biologically. Social memes that correspond to innate human propensities tend to survive and replicate in human populations (Dawkins), explaining in part the development and endurance of spiritual worldviews within the intersection of biological and cultural proclivities.

Spirituality and the human sciences. Professional education and practice appropriately focuses on issues of well-being and functioning with regard to human spirituality (Canda, 2008; Helminiak, 2006; Holloway & Moss, 2010; McSherry and Jamieson, 2011; Moss, 2011; Paley, 2008a). The fields of nursing and psychology have been pioneers in the inclusion of spirituality in education and practice (Holloway & Moss, 2010).

Nursing. The World Health Organization (2002) and the International Council of Nurses (2005) endorse the inclusion of spirituality into patient care (McSherry & Jamieson, 2011). Religion and spirituality are considered important factors in healthcare (Cook et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2010).

Biro (2012) investigated the importance of the relationship between the caregiver and the patient and what she saw as commonalities between good nursing care and spiritual care. Spiritual care in this context are those qualities of care that have to do with compassionate care beyond the simple conduct of specific nursing responsibilities. She conducted an international literature review on what is considered

good nursing healthcare and concluded that a nurse needs professional knowledge and skills as well as certain personal attributes to conduct good nursing care. The personal attributes important to good nursing care include being respectful, compassionate, sensitive, understanding, and honest (p. 1007). McSherry and Jamieson (2011) view good patient care as virtually identical to what is called spiritual care and involve qualities like cheerfulness and kindness. Holding a patient's hand, having a quiet conversation with them, and providing hope and human comfort can be considered spiritual care but are identical to good, compassionate nursing care (Flynn, 2009). Congruent with findings in the medical field on good patient care, the therapeutic relationship between social worker and client has been described as the most important element in successful treatment (Lambert & Barley, 2001).

Writers in the nursing field have expressed concerns about including spiritual care in education and practice. Paley (2008a) suggests that adding the term 'spiritual' to descriptions of patient distress or pain adds nothing but an uninformative label when other terms would serve as well. Paley posits that discussion about 'spiritual' care and what it means may be obscuring other, potentially more effective methods of patient care. Bash (2004) suggests that debate about the constructs that constitute spirituality should be abandoned. Instead, spirituality ought to be "what each person says it is" (p. 13), with the appropriate task of the helping professional consisting of providing appropriate support to the patient. Nursing has adopted a pragmatic approach to spirituality as it relates to patient care, regarding the proper definition of spirituality as being what each patient formulates it to mean (Paley, 2007).

Psychology. Psychology is a discipline that intersects with social work in the areas of clinical care and assessment, education, and many of the roles that are undertaken in the profession. Interestingly, the word 'psychology' comes from the Greek 'psyche,' which is also the word translated as 'soul' or 'spirit' (Helminiak, 2008). The German term 'geist' can be translated into English both as 'spirit' and 'mind,' and is often translated as 'mind/spirit' or 'spirit/mind' (Pate, 2011). The concept of 'geist' holds interesting implications for an approach to spirituality that describes spirituality as arising from the human mind.

The American Psychological Association approaches the challenge of integrating spirituality in practice by utilizing sociocultural understandings and the integration of knowledge from various disciplines to inform practice (Pargament, 2013a). Questions that are being explored include what it means to be religious and spiritual, why people are religious and spiritual, and how being spiritual or religious affects well-being and functioning. Subjects of interest in the study of psychology and spirituality include the intersection of spirituality with forgiveness, loss and grief, conflict, change, loneliness, and happiness (Pargament, 2013a). For Culliford (2011) the major issue around spirituality is how psychology can utilize spirituality to help clients reach optimal well-being and wholeness. Psychologists are also addressing how to differentiate the positive and negative effects of spirituality (Pargament, 2013a).

Summary. Religion is described as a system of beliefs and practices within a religious community (Canda, 2008; Dobbelaere, 2011). While spirituality also tends to pertain to beliefs in a higher power and/or a transcendent realm, spirituality is often seen as more personal and mystical than is religion (Ai, 2002; Pargament & Saunders, 2007). The lack of consensus on conceptualizations of spirituality provides significant challenges for the formulation of standards for education and practice in the area of spirituality (Holloway & Moss, 2010). A number of researchers in social work and related fields are presenting new perspectives on spirituality, including challenging assumptions that spirituality is a universal human concern (Paley, 2007) and pointing out the problematic acceptance of an undisputed spiritual domain (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2008; Helminiak, 2006; Paley, 2010).

Some researchers have attempted to construct frameworks of spirituality by developing common dimensions of spirituality for assessment measures (Canda & Furman, 2010; MacDonald, 2000), but these attempts have been inadequate within the context of new developments that include (a) exposure of local communities to a wide variety of spiritual worldviews within the global community; (b) the abundance of new spiritual beliefs; and (c) the increase in atheist perspectives (Skirbeck et al., 2010).

Research has begun to explicate the sociocultural, psychological, and physiological foundations of spirituality (Barrett, 2007). Religion and spirituality are described in current scientific research as the

outcome of both cultural and biopsychological influences (Bradshaw & Ellison, 2008; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Magee & Hardin, 2010).

Hoge (1996) noted that spirituality has “such vague and unbounded meanings” that it is virtually useless as a psychological construct (p. 21). Holloway & Moss (2010) assert it would be wearisome and useless to continue in endless debate about the nature of spirituality. In the realm of social work education and practice, what may matter most is that students become prepared to appropriately engage with their clients about their particular spiritual or existential worldviews (Bash, 2004). In the final analysis, perhaps the crucial consideration for social workers is what spirituality means to those for whom it has meaning (Anandarajah, 2008; Crisp, 2010; Holloway & Moss, 2010).

The tendency toward belief in spiritual explanations of phenomena seems to be universal among humans and hardwired into the human brain (King, 2006; Rothman, 2009). The universality of this tendency stands in contrast to the idea that spirituality—as a quest for connection with God, gods, or some kind of transcendent realm—is a universal human phenomenon (Hwang et al., 2011; McSherry & Jamieson, 2011; Paley, 2009).

It appears that questions about spirituality as it relates to the growing population of atheists and agnostics has not been adequately explored. Hwang et al. (2011) advocate the inclusion of atheists in patient care research as an important, under-researched population. They maintain that atheists who specifically identify as atheists (naturalists, humanists) should be researched in order to distinguish health and well-being factors between those who are theists and/or supernaturalists and those who are not.

Atheism

A scientific approach to spirituality can be considered a naturalistic approach (Alcock, 2009) that corresponds ontologically to the nonsupernatural approach of an atheist worldview (Zuckerman, 2008). An atheist is someone who lacks belief in God, gods, or any kind of higher power (American Atheists, 2015). Research indicates atheists do not find plausible the existence of beings holding properties outside of natural boundaries (including God, gods, angels, souls, and the like) and lack belief in the existence of a supernatural or transcendent realm (Baker & Smith, 2009; D’Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). People with

this perspective may also identify themselves as freethinkers, naturalists, rationalists, secularists, brights, or humanists. There has been a dearth of research on atheism (D’Andrea, & Sprenger, 2007; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Hwang et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 2008).

Demographics. The number of nonreligious persons (secularists, humanists, atheists, agnostics, rationalists, etc.) is increasing in the United States (Skirbeck et al., 2010) even while the United States has a much higher rate of religiosity than any other developed country (Lambert, 1999; Zuckerman, 2008). The extensive WIN-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012) found that 5% of the American population holds expressly atheist worldviews. Using data from a variety of sources, Skirbeck et al. (2010) projected the religious composition of the United States from 2010 through 2043 using post-millennial General Social Surveys. They conclude that rates of secularism and humanism will increase in the next decades as more people exit religion than are converted to it. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Pew Research, 2010) notes that one fourth of the Millennial generation counts themselves as ‘atheists,’ ‘agnostics,’ or ‘nothing in particular,’ the highest percentage of people within a specific cohort to reject theistic beliefs (Pew Research, 2010).

Secularism is rising among nations with a higher secondary educational base, though the United States stands out as unusual in retaining a high degree of religiosity (Edgell et al., 2006). Those who identify as ‘nones’ or unaffiliated with religion number about 23% in the United States (Pew Research, 2015). Only about 5% of the unaffiliated identify specifically as atheists (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). Five percent may be a lower percentage than those actually holding atheist perspectives since some are reluctant to reveal this identity due to continuing stigma (Edgell et al., 2006; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2011). The highest concentrations of atheism in the United States are in the West and Northeast (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

According to the extensive WIN-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012) that included 50,000 participants from 57 countries, fully 13% of the world’s population are “convinced atheists” (p. 2). The prevalence of persons without belief in God or gods is increasing around the world (Lyn et al., 2008). For instance, the percentage of those who identify as secular in Belgium is

43%, Denmark is at 48%, and France at 44%. Epstein (2009) estimates there are approximately one billion people on earth who define themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious.

Characteristics. The designation ‘atheist’ has been included in recent surveys such as the Pew Research Religious Public Life Project (Pew Research, 2015a and 2015b) and the WIN-Gallup International Survey (2012). These surveys now provide information on the percentages of persons who identify as atheist, unaffiliated, or agnostic.

Atheists are generally naturalists, which means they take the position that reality arises from natural qualities and causes (Oxford Online Dictionary, n.d.). Atheists associate the term ‘spirituality’ with God or gods and a transcendent realm, which they reject (Pasquale, 2007). They eschew standard conceptualizations of spirituality (Hwang et al., 2011; Smith-Stoner, 2007) including theistic and supernatural beliefs. Atheists tend to respond negatively to verbiage like ‘inner spirit,’ ‘spirituality,’ and ‘the sacred’ (Baker & Smith, 2009; Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2011) and tend not to differentiate between religious ideas about deities and souls and belief in clairvoyance, premonitions, astrology, and other beliefs that operate outside natural processes (Epstein, 2009; Maisel, 2009).

Atheists are philosophical realists (D’Andrea & Sprenger, 2007) who value logic and critical thinking (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011). Their rejection of religion and conventional spirituality arises from intellectual rather than emotional reasons (Epstein, 2009; Hwang et al., 2011). The most important factor in their atheism is an intellectual orientation (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011). Atheists are attracted to cognitive reflection and often work in settings such as colleges and universities where their worldview tends to be more accepted (Barrett, 2004). High percentages of social scientists, the higher educated, and eminent scientists are atheists (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007), and the percentages are increasing. The percentage of eminent scientists who reported believing in God in 1914 was 27%, 15% in 1933, and only 7% in 1998 (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007).

Atheists tend to be socially liberal, scoring lower on scales measuring prejudice than do believers (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007, Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2005). Atheists score lower on authoritarianism, prejudice, and suggestibility and higher on measures of tolerance (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007,

p. 313; Kirkpatrick). Atheists tend to be dogmatic about their beliefs (Hwang et al., 2011), perhaps because they, more than most people, have chosen their own beliefs (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Hunsberger and Altemeyer's 2006 study found that atheists prefer to let their children make their own choices about their worldview.

Stereotypes of atheists include both positive and negative traits. According to Harper (2007), atheists are thought to be individualist, nonconformist, independent, and mysterious; yet also self-centered, argumentative, immoral, and hard-headed. They have a lower divorce rate than the religious (Barna Research Group Survey, 2007; Hwang et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 2009). Ventis (1995) found higher levels of mental health among atheists that were attributed to qualities that included flexibility and a sense of self-competence. Atheists have been found to be independent, introverted, and tolerant of ambiguity (Hwang et al., 2011).

No differences can be found between atheists and believers on key psychological factors that include neuroticism, emotional disturbance, cheating, the likelihood of performing altruistic acts, depression, optimism, self-esteem, and the presence of an adequate personal social support network (Hwang et al., 2011). Caldwell-Harris et al. (2011) found no differences between atheists, Buddhists, and Christians on measures of sociability, emotional stability, measures of personal happiness, and friendliness.

There are no visible characteristics of atheism, which means one has to declare oneself or be quite outspoken about one's worldview to be known as an atheist (Cragun et al., 2012). Atheists report experiences of stigma due to their stance as atheists (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006), particularly within the workplace and school (Cragun et al.). One in four atheists reports experiencing discrimination in the last five years (Cragun et al., 2012; Hwang et al., 2011).

Stereotypes and misconceptions. Stereotypes and misperceptions about atheists abound in a religious nation like the United States (Cragun et al., 2012). National surveys indicate atheists are the least trusted American minority (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Edgell et al., 2006). In the United States, being religious is often associated with higher morality (Banerjee, Huebner, & Hauser, 2010; Edgell et al.,

2006). Since Americans tend to believe it is necessary to be religious to be moral and have good values (Flynn, 2009), atheists are suspected of being immoral (Pew Research Center, 2002) and self-centered (Harper, 2007).

Atheists have been labeled as “psychologically maladjusted or existentially bereft” (Hwang et al., 2011, p. 618). Discussions of spirituality and transcendence sometimes include an underlying assumption that without theistic or supernatural beliefs, life must be “shallow and superficial” (Norman, 2006, p. 486). Research on spirituality tends to focus on how religious or spiritual one is (Hwang et al., 2011), making implicit assumptions that individuals will have some kind of religious or spiritual beliefs and that lower levels of spiritual belief correlate with negative qualities or poor mental health. According to D’Andrea and Sprenger (2007), most people in the helping professions tend to assume their clients have religious beliefs. With its focus on the idea that all students have some kind of spirituality, the current focus on spirituality and religion in student development and on campus may be inadvertently contributing to the marginalization of atheist students (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Nash, 2003).

Contrary to the expectations of those who might suppose atheism contributes to societal problems, countries with high levels of atheism—including most European nations, Australia, Canada, and Japan—are among the healthiest nations in the world (United Nations Human Development Reports, 2013). The United Nations report uses empirical measures of societal health such as life expectancy, gender equality, educational attainment, and homicide rates to make their determinations about national health. Norris and Inglehart report that higher levels of secularity in nations is correlated with higher levels of societal health (2004). The United States is a unique exception among nations with high scores on the UN Human Development Reports, with only 6% of Americans asserting they do not hold god beliefs (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Zuckerman (2008) notes that the most nonreligious nations also rank highest in measures of health and life expectancy, standard of living, low corruption, and giving to charity. The World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012) reports the happiest nations are Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Sweden, which also happen to be among the most secular nations in the world (WIN-Gallup International, 2012).

Invisible atheists. Research findings support the premise that the number of people who fit the definition of atheist is higher than the number of people who actually identify as atheists (Sherkat, 2008; Zuckerman, 2008). Some atheists are assumed to be religious because they take part in religious activities such as church attendance (Hwang et al., 2011). The phenomena of the culturally religious is particularly pronounced in Scandinavia, where church-going is associated with transitions and community events and seems to occur in spite of rather than because of any supernatural elements that the churches may espouse (Zuckerman, 2008).

Many atheists attend religious services for cultural rather than religious reasons and are assumed to be believers (Barker, D., 2008; Edgell et al., 2006; Zuckerman, 2008). Assumptions are made that atheists are religious when they take part in religious activities such as church attendance (Hwang et al., 2011). Voas (2009) notes that an increasing number of people subscribe to what he terms “fuzzy fidelity” (p. 161) in which persons may identify with a denomination but hold little interest in the tenets of their religion. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010) notes that one fourth of Millennials count themselves as ‘atheists,’ ‘agnostics,’ or ‘nothing in particular.’ Many of these Millennials may not feel they can announce their non-belief to their families and communities and may continue to have a cultural relationship with religion rather than holding actual beliefs in church dogmas.

Recent research shows a steady reduction in the firmness of belief in orthodox teachings (Pew Research, 2010). Many Americans who are nominally religious report a distinct agnosticism about beliefs that are considered foundational to their religious groups (Cheyne, 2010, Dennett & LaScola, 2010). The percentage of young Americans who expressed certainty about the existence of God decreased from 83% in 2007 to 68% in 2010 (Pew Research, 2010). This research seems to indicate a direction towards some degree of agnosticism among those who continue to identify as religious.

Some pastors are atheists but remain closeted about their lack of belief because their livelihood depends upon religion (Dennett & LaScola, 2010). The Clergy Project (Clergy Project, n.d.) is an online support community for professional clergy who no longer hold supernatural beliefs. New members are screened for purposes of anonymity and the safety of members. The support community discusses issues

such as transitioning to a new career with no credentials other than religious training, dealing with cognitive dissonance, and whether or not (or how) to come out to family, friends, and parishioners. The membership has grown to 700 members since its inception in 2011.

Competence in Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are recognized in social work education and practice as important elements of the human experience and as essential components of cultural competency (CSWE, 2015; NASW 2007). The Council on Social Work Education sets standards for education in social work and the National Association of Social Workers provides guidelines for ethical social work practice. No clear guidelines exist about how or what should be taught about spirituality. The NASW and CSWE provide social workers and social work students with general guidelines about addressing the needs of clients from various cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds; examining their own belief systems and biases; and becoming familiar with the cultures and religious belief systems held by their clients (CSWE, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2001, 2007).

National Association of Social Workers competency standards for spirituality. The basic foundation of professional competency is considered by the National Association of Social Workers to be the ability to respond “respectfully and effectively” to diversity (NASW, 2001, p. 13). The National Association of Social Workers Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2001) advises social workers to “focus on individual well-being in a social context” (p. 15). Social workers must develop “the critical skill of asking the right questions, being comfortable with discussing cultural differences, and asking clients what works for them” (p. 19). Other pertinent recommendations include (a) developing an understanding of one’s own biases and beliefs; (b) obtaining specialized knowledge about the cultures of the major client groups that social workers serve; (c) the ability to recognize the unique strengths of various belief systems; (d) training on skills that help foster client strengths in the area of spirituality without being assumptive or directive; (e) guidance on maintaining professional boundaries; (f) familiarity with ethical guidelines that can be used to help clients utilize their own spiritual worldviews to help them find healthy and satisfactory outcomes; and (g) the development of practice models, specific

standards, and attitudes that address diverse needs with the requisite respect and affirmation (NASW, 2001; NASW, 2007).

The NASW developed the Indicators for the Achievement of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (NASW, 2007) to elaborate upon initial recommendations for cultural competency that were devised in 2001 (NASW, 2001). The NASW (2007) describes professional competency in social work as occurring within the boundaries of the values and perspectives of social work. Some of the standards pertinent for spiritual competency include the primacy of enhancing well-being; serving clients who are oppressed and addressing injustice as it is found; client empowerment; considering clients within their unique sociocultural environments; and sensitivity and appreciation for diversity (pp. 17-18). Also included are the need to develop sensitivity to cultural diversity and to “examine . . . own cultural backgrounds and identities to increase awareness of personal assumptions, values, and biases” (pp. 18-19); as well as to become familiar with various worldviews and their norms and practices, including understanding of beliefs about what constitutes a good life, personal well-being, and community well-being (p. 23).

Competence for practice around spirituality. According to Ai (2002), spiritual competence means being adequately prepared to address spirituality with clients. According to Mascaro and Rosen (2006), social workers should be trained for awareness of the presence of spiritual issues in every presenting problem and be prepared to address them. Spiritual competence can be considered a subset of cultural competence that involves the ability to devise and implement interventions that are relevant to the client’s spiritual or existential issues (Barker & Floersch, 2010, p. 106).

A number of writers have outlined ideas about the essential components of professional competency in spirituality. Gergen (2009) lists the following elements of spiritual competency: (a) the ability to create a safe and affirming environment; (b) the ability to conduct effective religious and spiritual assessments; (c) the skills to use or encourage clients to use spirituality as a strength; and (d) the knowledge to consult with or refer clients to qualified religious professionals as needed. Hodge (2006) recommends that social workers should have the following professional competencies: (a) an awareness

of their own worldview with its associated assumptions and biases; (b) a sensitive understanding of their clients' spiritual worldviews without ascribing negativity to them; and (c) the ability to design and implement interventions that are sensitive to clients' spiritualities. Hodge describes spiritual competency as "a set of attitudes, knowledge and skills" that continue to be developed over the professional social work career (p. 106).

Requirements for competency mandated by the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers focus on spirituality as a matter of cultural competency and client well-being. Underlying spiritual competency is the over-riding social work mandate to focus on client well-being and functioning within clients' social contexts (NASW, 2007). A foundation for understanding client needs is the ability to ask pertinent questions, comfortably discuss diversity, and have an awareness of one's own biases and preferences as one engages with clients (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, 2001).

The Curriculum and Spirituality

Spirituality is considered an important cultural element that students should be prepared to address in their practice (CSWE, 2015; NASW 2007). The purpose of curriculum content on spirituality is to prepare students to address issues about spirituality with their clients. Spirituality was brought into the curriculum due to practitioner reports that they felt inadequately prepared for practice in the field (Crook-Lyon et al., 2012; Hodge & McGrew, 2005; Moss, 2011; Rothman, 2009).

According to Moss (2011) any accredited school of social work in the United States must include material on spirituality. Of the more than 190 accredited MSW programs, 75 offered courses on religion and spirituality in 2005, up from only 4 in 1985 (Canda, 2005). A growing number of social work programs include spirituality in material on cultural diversity and also provide specific courses on spirituality (Canda, 2005; Hodge & McGrew, 2006). In a study of 222 social work faculty, Wuest (2009) found that 75% of the sampled social work faculty reported including some kind of content on spirituality in their coursework.

There are challenges to the inclusion of religion and spirituality in a curriculum that is already overcrowded (Sheffield & Openshaw, 2009), with social work programs often having to integrate material on spirituality into other courses. There is a lack of conceptual clarity on what to teach (Ai, 2002) complicated by a lack of consensus about the nature of spirituality despite intense efforts to develop some kind of consensus (Berry, 2005). Some concerns exist that curriculum content is sometimes inappropriate for university level education (Ai, 2002) and that there is a need to develop a consistent professionally focused curriculum based on CSWE and NASW standards.

The Council on Social Work Education (2015) sets standards for cultural competence in social work education. Religious and spiritual competence is covered to some extent by general cultural competency guidelines. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education (2015) addresses religion and spirituality as dimensions of cultural competence. The 2004 General Assembly of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers adopted international standards that include spiritual issues as part of the required knowledge base for social work practice (IASSW, 2004). Gamble (2004) expounded on the meaning of the competency standards, defining competencies as “measurable practice behaviors that are comprised of knowledge, values, judgments, and skills” (5th paragraph). As of yet, there are only vague guidelines for curriculum content on spirituality. Competency standards as described by Gamble (2004) for the education of social work students in the area of spirituality need development and clarification.

Council on Social Work Education requirements. The Council on Social Work Education (2015) oversees the requirements for social work education. There are no specific standards for competence in spirituality, though the CSWE (2015) provides general guidelines which provide a framework for building a curriculum for competency.

The current discussion on curriculum content on spirituality. There is a paucity of studies specifically related to the social work curriculum on spirituality, though recommendations for content on spirituality in the curriculum can be found (Furman, Benson, Canda, & Grimwood, 2005; Furness &

Gilligan, 2010; Northcut, 2004; Rothman, 2009). All accredited schools of social work are required to include material on spirituality as a subset of cultural competency (Moss, 2011).

Rothman (2009) recommends that the curriculum should concentrate on three basic areas of learning for competence in the area of spirituality: (a) knowledge acquisition, including theoretical frameworks from multiple disciplines about spirituality, information about specific religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, information about ways in which spirituality can be helpful, characteristics of spiritual expression, and information about resources in the community; (b) skill acquisition—general social work skills such as assessment, building a relationship, and integrating spirituality into interventions; and (c) self-awareness and growth—exercises to increase students' understanding of their own experiences, biases, and reactions to others' worldviews. Pargament (2013), Holloway and Moss (2010) expand upon Rothman's (2009) recommendations for knowledge acquisition by pointing out that there are also negative aspects of spirituality on well-being that must be acknowledged and addressed appropriately in practice.

Furness and Gilligan (2010) recommend the following elements for a comprehensive curriculum for competency in spirituality: (a) providing a framework students will be able to use for client self-empowerment; (b) tools that enable the social worker to seek out relevant information; (c) training in the development of a relationship with the client in which the social worker demonstrates willingness to engage with spiritual issues from the client's standpoint; (d) the promotion of self-awareness about students' own beliefs and biases; and (e) the tools that will demonstrate to clients a willingness to discuss difficulties and needs about the client's spirituality.

Northcut (2004) emphasizes the importance of students becoming familiar and comfortable with the subject of spirituality. She recommends exercises and knowledge acquisition that will help students become aware of their assumptions and biases, learn to recognize religious and spiritual themes that may arise in treatment, and acquire skills that can be applied to spiritual issues. Rothman (2009) also notes that familiarity with various worldviews will help students learn to communicate effectively about them.

Exercises in which students confront different worldviews provide opportunities for students to challenge their own biases and assumptions and help them acquire understanding about various perspectives (Rothman, 2009). Increased self-examination of the impact of one's personal spiritual or secular worldviews can equip students with the critical thinking skills they need to articulate their practice decisions, assist them to better identify potential ethical dilemmas, and provide guidance to address them when they arise (Rice & McAuliffe, 2009).

Considerations. Many social workers and educators are reluctant to engage with religion and spirituality (Barker & Floersch, 2010). Most social workers report they received little or no training on religion and spirituality in their coursework (Sheridan, 2009). Students indicate they consider competency in religion and spirituality important (Graff, 2007) but are receiving little or no preparation in their coursework for addressing these issues in practice (Rothman, 2009). Despite the requirements for professional competency in the area of spirituality, social workers perceive themselves as inadequately prepared to address issues around spirituality (Moss, 2011). In spite of evaluating themselves as poorly equipped, most social workers are already using some kind of spiritual interventions regularly in practice (Stewart, Koeske, & Koeske, 2006).

NASW (2001, 2007) and CSWE (2015) standards provide very broad categories for competency in religion and spirituality. These include the ability to engage with diversity effectively within the parameters of social work values and perspectives; to advocate for social justice and individual well-being; to work to increase awareness of the social worker's own biases and assumptions; and to adhere to scientifically informed, ethical practice.

In classroom and field settings a focus on religious or supernatural beliefs has the potential to inadvertently convey a negative message to those who hold alternative worldviews (Helminiak, 2006). Atheists are known to react negatively to terminology about supernatural things like higher powers, persons having 'mind, body, and spirit,' and the 'sacred' (Baker & Smith, 2009; Hwang et al., 2011). It can be expected that atheist students will not relate to conceptualizations of spirituality that are based on

assumptions of the supernatural. A more inclusive use of language and content seems indicated to reflect the full range of worldviews that are represented both in the social work classroom and in practice.

Streets (2009) notes the close association social work values share with those of religious and spiritual frameworks. Social work values include service, respect for others, “challenging social injustice, respecting the inherent dignity and worth of persons,” integrity, and the importance of relationships (p. 188). Most social work students talk about the wish to serve others and contribute to social justice as major motivations for entering the profession (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997). Social work values motivate and give meaning to most social workers. The social work profession contains many elements that can certainly be framed as spiritual. Social work students are trained to foster client hopes and dreams, help people manage fears and worries that disrupt satisfaction, assist clients in utilizing their strengths, and empower clients on their particular journeys.

Atheists and Spirituality

It seems strange to propose that atheists have some kind of spiritual worldview in light of their negative response to terminology like ‘spiritual’ and ‘the sacred’ (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2011) and their lack of belief in major constructs of spirituality. Baker and Smith (2009) found that 78% of atheists described themselves as ‘not at all spiritual.’ Despite this, a growing number of writers describe alternative views of spirituality from an atheist perspective (Carrier, 2005, Comte-Sponville, 2006; Harris, 2014; Maisel, 2009;). Atheism can be as much an orienting worldview as religious and supernaturally-based spiritual perspectives (Whitley, 2010).

Atheist perspectives of some common factors of spirituality. Atheists have the same basic concerns as do individuals who subscribe to a religious or supernatural worldview (Flynn, 2009). Atheists and believers have similar existential and moral concerns (Michell, 2009) as well as the capacity for love and wonder (Hwang et al., 2011). When theistic and supernatural beliefs are removed, atheist applications of many common factors of spirituality remain. A few examples follow:

Transcendence. Atheists experience transcendence that is rooted in the natural rather than the supernatural (Norman, 2006). Transcendence can apply to peak experiences, altruism, and relationship to

art and music, among other things (Elkins et al., 1988). Self-transcendence consists of going beyond oneself in some way (Howell, 2009) and can appear as altruistic acts, dedication to a cause, having a grounding in a specific philosophy, communing with nature, partaking in music and art, or reading an interesting book that brings the individual to an understanding of something new (Howell). Another dimension of transcendence is the quality of surmounting suffering (Cook et al., 2012).

The sacred. There are objects, events, and practices that are considered sacred that have nothing to do with spirituality as it is commonly formulated. Some examples include transitions like weddings, material objects like wedding rings, persons who are held in high esteem, psychological and social features like patriotism, roles such as parenting, and certain spaces and times like church or July 4th (Pargament, 1999). The site of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City took on a sacred meaning for some (Landau et al., 2004). For atheists the concept of the sacred can encompass feelings of awe, wonder, and connection with nature (Epstein, 2009).

Meaning and purpose. There are few people who are not concerned with having a meaningful life (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011). For atheists meaning and purpose are not imposed from an external source; hence, they are not interested in a ‘search for meaning’ but rather in creating their own sense of meaning (Baggini, 2009; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Hwang et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 2008). For them, there is meaning *in* life rather than *the* meaning of life. Atheists do not think of ‘ultimate’ existential concerns (Pasquale, 2007) but instead find themselves engaging in a lifelong process of discovery (Carrier, 2005; Comte-Sponville, 2006; Maisel, 2009; Sagan, 2006). Atheist meaning is located in altruism, relationships, contributing to the well-being of society or the planet, creativity, beauty, living in the moment, and connection with nature (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Michell, 2009; Zuckerman, 2008).

Atheist frameworks for spirituality. Some writers have begun articulating atheist ideas of spirituality (Comte-Sponville, 2006; Harris, 2014; Maisel, 2009; Sagan, 2006; Zuckerman, 2008). Atheists may relate to spirituality if it is defined as having to do with connections with nature; family and friends; and personal growth and well-being (Smith-Stoner, 2007). Some atheists report they would use

the term ‘spirituality’ in the context of certain psychological experiences such as awe and wonder (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Ecklund & Long, 2011). The supernatural, in terms of gods and a realm beyond the natural, is considered non-existent and irrelevant to an atheist framework of spirituality (Ecklund & Long, 2011).

Despite atheists’ negative reaction to ideas about higher powers, ‘the spirit’ and ‘the sacred’ (Hwang et al., 2011), persons identifying as ‘spiritual atheists’ present an unexpected subset of the 275 scientists from 21 top universities who were interviewed for the Religion Among Academic Scientists study (Ecklund & Long, 2011). Of the atheist scientists, 22% considered themselves spiritual, and 27% of the agnostic scientists also identified with the term ‘spirituality.’ Ecklund and Long note that their understanding of the natural world gives these scientists the knowledge to understand and experience the awe of its complexity. The “spiritual impulse” they feel is therefore deeply connected to and coherent with their work as scientists (p. 269). Spirituality for atheists is often connected with nature (Ecklund & Long) as was the spirituality of atheists in Smith-Stoner’s study of end-of-life issues (2007).

Atheists have written about their worldview and how it informs their lives since ancient times. Around 600 BCE in ancient India there existed a philosophical school called Carakas (Lee, 2007). Their ideas mirror those of many modern atheists in their endorsement of social justice, skepticism, and the supremacy of reason. They thought one should enjoy life and practice compassion in life because there is no soul, heaven, or supernatural realm (par. 6).

Sagan (2006) considered the wonders of the real universe more awe-inspiring than any religious ideas of an imagined higher power could ever be and the pursuit of scientific truth the highest spiritual discipline (xi). Science was a source of spirituality for him as the intricacy, beauty, and immensity of the universe inspired humility and elation (1996). The human frame of reference is not broad enough to perceive the scientific realities of quantum physics (pertaining to the smallest scale) or special relativity (pertaining to the largest scale) (Dawkins, 2005). The human knowledge of the wonder and awe of things we cannot fully grasp creates a sense of wonder and awe that is the kind of spirituality enjoyed by atheists (Sagan, 2006).

Russell (1971) considered the highest spiritual principles to be “kindly feeling and veracity” (*Faith of a Rationalist*, par. 1). He noted compassion and reason are at the heart of the qualities that serve to ease suffering and injustice (par. 3). His philosophy was that if kindly feeling and veracity were practiced, injustice and war would cease, everyone would have what they need, and the general happiness of the world would be increased. One quote seems to exemplify an atheist worldview: “no supernatural reasons are needed to make men kind and . . . only through kindness can the human race achieve happiness” (par. 8).

Maisel (2009) notes people tend to romanticize (or spiritualize) certain things and devalue others. He advocates a “passionate meaning-making” (p. 45) in which one embraces decisions based on reason and compassion that result in formulating one’s character and life according to what one intends it to be. Comte-Sponville (2006) writes “it is more appropriate to respond to being with mystery, to evil with horror and compassion, to mediocrity with mercy and humor . . . to our wishes and illusions with lucidity” (p. 132). He describes spirituality as identical to wisdom and ethics. Spirituality can never be transcendent because we are inside everything (referring to the sum of all conditions, relationships and possible perspectives). Comte-Sponville writes of a spiritual practice of acceptance that brings worries and sufferings to rational observation that opens one to action. He writes of moments that are transcendent in the sense of an experience of immersion, unity, and peace where the sense of time changes and one experiences “simply being” (p. 157).

Atheists, though not believing in the supernatural, can be quite drawn to mysticism. Richard Jefferies was an atheist nature writer who cultivated mystical experiences with nature. He loved taking solitary hikes in his favorite natural settings and found that the beauty and tranquility of nature brought a sense of “magic and meaning” (Coleman, n.d., par. 3). Jefferies’ *The Story of My Heart: My Autobiography* (1898/2009) contains an example of the sense of a timeless unself-consciousness:

Eternity is here and now. I am within it, much like the butterfly on the light-permeated air. Nothing is still to come. Everything is already here. Eternity now. Immortal life now. I am experiencing it here, at this very instant (Chapter 3, par. 6).

Spiritual frameworks that may be utilized with atheist clients. Crisp (2008) and Helminiak (2008) recommend using language that is appropriate for clients who hold a variety of worldviews. Holloway and Moss (2010) propose that certain words and phrases can be used as ‘gateway’ terms that open up dialogue about a cluster of concepts (p. 33). Some gateway words or phrases may be more useful than others for exploring existential or spiritual issues with people of a wide variety of worldviews. These can include general, non-directive questions that have the potential to open up a discussion about spiritual or existential issues, such as “What gives your life meaning?” (Holloway & Moss, 2010, p. 93).

Although words like ‘spirituality’ can be distasteful for some people (Baker & Smith, 2009; Zuckerman, 2008), the word ‘spirituality’ is also used to mean that which is fulfilling or worthwhile (Hill et al., 2000, p. 55). ‘Worldview’ has been described as the overall perspective or framework through which an individual interprets the world (Huang & Shih, 2011; Schilders, Sloep, Peled, & Boersma, 2009). The term ‘worldview’ has an advantage in interactions with atheists because it is a broader term that is free from associations with the supernatural.

Meditation and mindfulness are often considered spiritual practices and yet can be utilized by atheists as well as believers (Canda & Furman, 2010; Epstein, 2009; Hodge & Derezotes, 2008). Meditation is often used clinically and mindfulness is a recommended best practice for mental health practitioners (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2008; van Alderen et al., 2012).

Current Controversies

Certain controversies are relevant to a study of atheist perspectives within social work education and practice. There have been calls for a more scientific approach to spirituality in social work practice that focuses more closely on its relationship to professional values and the well-being of individuals and communities (Alcock, 2009; Helminiak, 2008; Moss, 2011). Mandates for competency in practice (NASW, 2007) inform the requirements for curriculum content (CSWE, 2015). The NASW (2007) mandates that social workers focus on client well-being within their social environments. CSWE Educational Policy 2.16 requires social workers to utilize research-based interventions in practice and scientific and ethical approaches to learning (CSWE, 2015).

Researchers have begun to challenge an oftentimes unchallenged acceptance of the legitimacy of formulations of spirituality based on supernatural premises (Hoyt, 2008; Hwang et al., 2011; Paley, 2010). Questions about the ontological status of spirituality—whether the phenomena endorsed by religious and supernatural beliefs constitute a reality in themselves or are products of biopsychosocial processes—have not been openly addressed in the literature until recently (MacDonald, 2009). Paley (2010) suggests that the helping professions would do well to bracket unsupported claims about supernatural realms in order to better conceptualize spiritual and existential needs with a focus on research-based practices to enhance the well-being of clients.

The current literature generally reflects an assumption that spirituality is universal. For instance, Rovers and Kocum (2010) describe spirituality as a “multidimensional space within which every person may be located” (p. 3). While such verbiage is perhaps intended to provide an inclusive framework, it retains the idea that all people hold spiritual perspectives of some kind and excludes consideration of the growing population of people who hold naturalist worldviews.

Summary

Social workers are required to have competency in the area of spirituality (NASW, 2001, 2007) in order to be prepared to confront issues about religion and spirituality in the field (Bash, 2004; Holloway & Moss, 2010). All accredited schools of social work are required to provide course material on spirituality (Moss, 2011). The approach and content of coursework varies greatly (Ai, 2002; Senreich, 2013) and social workers report they do not come out of training feeling prepared to appropriately address spiritual issues with their clients (Furman et al, 2005; Furness & Gilligan, 2010).

With the development of a global community, social workers are encountering a wider variety of religious and spiritual worldviews (Skirbeck et al., 2010). New religions and alternative forms of spirituality are appearing (Saraglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). The study of spirituality has become broad, encompassing not only examination of religious and spiritual worldviews themselves but also a growing body of scientific research about the underlying factors that influence the development of spiritual beliefs (Barrett, 2007).

Most conceptualizations of spirituality include theistic or other supernatural elements, including ideas about a transcendent realm (Ecklund & Long, 2011; Hodge & Derezotes, 2008; Neff, 2006; Pargament & Saunders, 2007; Rice, 2003; Rothman, 2009). The curriculum reflects this focus and thus may not be properly preparing students to confront the real worldviews of many of their clients. Concerns have been expressed about curriculum content on spirituality. Coursework material has been described as unprofessional, “fuzzy” and inappropriate for academic settings (Ai, 2002, p. 110). A lack of consensus on how to conceptualize spirituality (Holloway & Moss, 2010; Paley, 2007; Senreich, 2013) makes it difficult to develop consistency in material on spirituality for education and practice (Holloway & Moss, 2010; Paley, 2007).

There have been calls for a more scientific approach to the study of spirituality that focuses on its relationship to professional values and the well-being of individuals and communities (Alcock, 2009; Helminiak, 2008; Moss, 2011). Crook-Lyon et al. (2012) assert that religion and spirituality should be addressed in a scientific manner as an aspect of cultural competency but should not be considered valid frameworks for practice. It should be remembered that the ultimate goal of the inclusion of content on spirituality in the curriculum is to prepare social workers to appropriately interact with their clients on matters of spirituality that may arise (Holloway & Moss, 2010). The primary goal of social work interventions is to increase the functioning of individuals and communities (NASW Code of Ethics, Ethical Principles, 2008).

With their focus away from the supernatural and religious elements of spiritual worldviews (Pasquale, 2007; Smith-Stoner, 2007), naturalist worldviews align in many ways with current scientific research on spirituality that explicates the biological, psychological, and sociocultural foundations of human spirituality (Barrett, 2007; Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010; Tremlin, 2006). The study of atheist perspectives and experiences of spirituality provides new avenues for understanding the human construction of spirituality. The perspectives of atheist social work students can provide suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality that may help bring a focus on what students need to learn to address issues of spirituality and worldviews in their practice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Spirituality is a phenomena that presents unique challenges for academic inquiry. The sociocultural and behavioral aspects of religious and spiritual worldviews can be studied, but the underlying supernatural aspects of various religious and spiritual worldviews cannot be directly investigated (MacDonald, 2009). The ontological position for this study is that spirituality is a constructed human phenomenon arising from biological, psychological, and sociocultural influences (Brandt et al., 2010; Helminiak, 2008; Kagan, 2008; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003; Tremlin, 2006; Wade, 2009).

This position is not intended to affirm or dispute any supernatural frameworks for spiritual worldviews. It does suggest that it may be most appropriate to bracket supernatural elements of spirituality for the purposes of academically and professionally appropriate curriculum content on spirituality.

Constructivism was chosen as the appropriate methodological framework for this study because constructivist inquiry is appropriate for the description, understanding, and interpretation of human phenomena (Morrow, 2007). Constructivism is a research paradigm that contends that realities like worldviews are socially constructed phenomena that take multiple forms in local contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The constructivist paradigm provides the methodological structure for this inquiry.

Becoming acquainted with the existing literature on pertinent topics relevant to this study established a perspective and foundation for the rationale and management of this research project (Kvale, 1996). Articles and book chapters deemed useful for planning and conducting the methodology of the research included those related to: (a) qualitative studies utilizing constructivist methods, grounded theory, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and other methodologies that are appropriate for eliciting participant ideas and experiences; (b) interview research; (c) the use of self as research instrument; (d) utilizing the internet for qualitative research; (e) goodness and quality issues; and (f) research that could serve as exemplars for the current study.

Problem and Purpose Overview

The social work curriculum includes spirituality as a vital factor of human diversity and wellness (Holloway & Moss, 2010) that is required to prepare social work students to address issues about religion and spirituality that may arise in practice (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2007). Curriculum content on spirituality generally contains assumptions that religious and spiritual beliefs are predominant and relevant to all clients (Hoyt, 2008).

In contrast, a recent report from the Higher Education Research Institute, in a survey of 153,000 freshmen from 277 institutions in the United States, revealed that 27.5% of college students picked ‘none’ as their religious preference (Eagan et al., 2014). Kosmin’s study of American college and university students (2013) found that 33% reported they have no religion and 28% reported they identify as ‘secular.’ Atheism is a subset of the group identifying as ‘non-religious.’ The WIN-Gallup International poll of 51,000 participants from 57 nations revealed that 23% of the participants identified as nonreligious and 13% identified as “convinced atheists” (p. 2). Despite their increasing numbers, almost no research exists about atheist students (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Nash, 2003), who have been described as “invisible, marginalized, and stigmatized” on college campuses (Goodman & Mueller, p. 57). Since atheists do not hold a belief in deities or supernatural realms (Baker & Smith, 2009), the current dialogue on spirituality may not be relevant to a significant number of social work students, educators, and their potential clients.

Patton (1990) notes that pragmatic concerns are the primary impetus for research. The purpose of this exploratory and descriptive study was to investigate the perspectives and experiences of a sample of university atheist-identified social work students about spirituality and their experience and perspectives about curriculum content on spirituality in social work higher education. The methodology was designed to gain interpretive understandings of the perspectives of a specific set of participants only rather than those of all atheist social work students. The study had a twofold purpose: (a) to describe and understand how a sample of atheist social work students perceive and understand the phenomenon of spirituality, and

(b) to gain understandings and knowledge from their experiences and perspectives that might be utilized to improve curriculum content on spirituality.

Constructivist Paradigm and Methods

The appropriate approach to a specific research project is determined by the nature of the data that are sought (Morrow, 2007) and the underlying assumptions that will guide the research (Guba, 1990). The foundational beliefs of a research paradigm differentiate them as more or less useful for a particular project (Teddle, 2005) and provide the context for a study (Ponterotto, 2005). The methodological tools that were used were those deemed most useful for finding out the answers to the research questions. As a paradigm that focuses on the creation rather than the discovery of human constructions of reality (Raskin, 2002), a constructivist methodology was chosen for this research because its underlying philosophy of science fits the needs of the study.

Ontology. Ontological assumptions are beliefs about the nature of reality (Guba, 1990). For academic purposes, spirituality can best be described as a construct that arises from a complex interplay of cultural, psychological, biological, and other forces (Ponterotto, 2005; Pyysiäinen, 2002; Tremlin, 2006). It is a complex, varied, and multidimensional construct (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Paley, 2007) about which there is a lack of consensus among cultural groups and individuals (Holloway & Moss, 2010). A consistent theoretical framework for spirituality in social work education and practice has not yet been developed (Senreich, 2013).

The subject of spirituality fits well within a constructivist paradigm that emphasizes a relativist understanding of multiple socially constructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Haverkamp & Young, 2007) within specific contexts (Appleton & King, 2002). Per Crotty (1998), there is no specific interpretation of a constructed phenomenon that can be described as more ‘true’ or ‘valid’ than another, yet some interpretations of the phenomenon may be “more useful, fulfilling, or more liberating” than others (p. 47). The constructions this particular group of participants created are intended to provide local perspectives (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011) that will be useful to inform curriculum content on spirituality.

Epistemology. Assumptions about knowledge and the manner in which it is gathered or constructed comprise the epistemological foundations of a paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism emphasizes the subjective relationship between the researcher and participants (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006) and the co-construction of knowledge arising from the interaction between them during the research process (Guba, 1990; Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). Understanding and meaning are the desired outcomes of constructivist research (Willis, 2007) and are acquired in a dialogic and hermeneutic process between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Since knowledge is co-created (Haverkamp & Young, 2007), the most appropriate means of producing knowledge about atheist students was to recruit a sample of atheist university social work students and to use methodological tools appropriate for the facilitation of knowledge co-construction utilizing the interaction between researcher and participants. Rich knowledge was sought through a dialogic, hermeneutic process of email interview exchanges designed to elicit rich descriptions that were expanded upon in an iterative process (Lamnek, 1998).

Methodology. Human meanings and constructions are the focus of constructivist inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A constructivist methodology utilizes methods designed to investigate human meaning-making and constructions of reality (Schwandt, 1994) and is ideal for the investigation of unique lived experiences and perspectives (Crotty, 1998). Since knowledge about human constructions arises from the interaction between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) it was important to use methodological tools that fostered a connection with participants and that promoted a dialogic process of interchanges. A number of methodologies informed this project and were utilized as appropriate tools under the umbrella of a constructivist paradigm for the research:

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is a theoretical framework designed for the investigation of lived experience and meaning making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Patton (1990) describes phenomenology as research about how humans experience and construct phenomena. It is a methodology well suited for the study of the phenomenon of spirituality, which is considered a complex constructed phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Paley, 2007).

Traditional phenomenologists discuss bracketing out the researcher's experiences, perspectives, and previous knowledge in order to investigate phenomena in a manner that is as free from preconceptions as is possible (Moustakas, 1994). Current phenomenological methodology recognizes the inevitable presence of the perspectives, knowledge, and experience of the researcher within the research process (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). Rather than bracketing out the qualities and experience of the researcher, the researcher is considered the primary instrument of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Reflexivity was utilized to help me maintain self-awareness about the influence of my own personality, knowledge, reactions, thoughts, and experiences on the research (Charmaz, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010). I utilized various methods such as memoing, reflective journaling and conversations with peers to remain aware of the effects of my own experience and perspectives on the interview process and analysis of the data. In constructivist inquiry it is not considered problematic that the perspectives and experience of the researcher influences the research. Guidelines do exist to minimize the possibility of misrepresentation (Maxwell, 1996), but constructivism reshapes the role of the researcher as an active participant and co-creator of knowledge (Mills et al., 2006).

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics holds that meaning is hidden and requires deep reflection to be brought forth (Schwandt, 2000). In a hermeneutic process dialogue is followed by interpretation, reaching a tentative understanding and conceptualization and then moving back again into dialogue (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). This repetitive, recursive process was a useful frame with which to conduct the cycle of writing and responding, conceptualizing and then writing again that comprised data collection and the early stages of data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Interviewing took place through a series of email conversations that proved to be well adaptable to a hermeneutic process.

Within a hermeneutic framework my goal was to elicit the perspectives and experiences of participants by investigating, conceptualizing responses and posing clarifying questions, providing feedback and probing for perspectives about new concepts as they arose (Lamnek, 1998). The goal of the hermeneutic circle is to “produce as informed and sophisticated a construction as possible” (Guba, 1990a, p. 26). The experience of reading, reflecting, and responding comprised the hermeneutic circle of going to

the whole and the parts and back again described by Lincoln & Guba (1985). The parts consisted of phrases, ideas, and experiences constructed by the participants and the whole became the developing conceptualizations that arose out of the dialogic process (Crotty, 1998). Data collection and analysis occurred at the same time. Questions, responses, and ideas were exchanged continuously as the researcher went back to participants for clarification and expansion of their ideas and experiences (Charmaz, 1995). The theoretical framework of hermeneutics was well suited for email interviews because researcher and participants had time to formulate well considered replies and add new comments and perspectives to the data with each round of email exchanges.

Grounded theory. Grounded theory is a method of collecting and analyzing data that was developed with the goal of theory development (Charmaz, 2012). I utilized Charmaz's constructivist approach to grounded theory, which focuses on subjective understandings of participants' perspectives and meanings (Charmaz, 2000). This study was not intended to produce theory but rather conceptualizations and generalizations that are "partial, conditional and situated in time and space" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 141). Grounded theory methods were useful as a frame with which to 'ground' the data in an iterative process of theorizing, going back to participants for clarification, reviewing the literature, discussing findings and emerging conceptualizations with peers, and analyzing incoming data throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005).

The literature on spirituality, atheists, and social work education was reviewed and analyzed in preparation for conducting the study (Boote & Biele, 2005) to ground the research in knowledge from the current literature. This provided something of a focus for data collection, but it was also necessary to avoid becoming so immersed in concepts and expectations from the literature that my openness to participant constructions would be negatively affected (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). Charmaz (Puddephatt, 2006) provided the useful advice to utilize curiosity and "theoretical playfulness" to remain open to emerging theory (p. 16).

Ethnography and narrative inquiry. This research contains elements of ethnography and narrative inquiry, which are constructivist methodologies suited for understanding cultural behavior,

worldviews, and experiences (Schwandt, 2007). Narrative inquiry and ethnography are both well suited for understanding phenomena like spirituality (Barker & Floersch, 2010). Each methodology offers a different approach to the study of human meaning making and sociocultural interactions. Ethnography is described by Schwandt as “the process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behavior” (p. 96). Much of the data consist of participants’ rich interpretations and descriptions of their own and others’ cultural behaviors. Narrative inquiry focuses on the study of the production of narratives or stories about life experiences. Much of the data are in the form of narratives that participants used to express their experiences and perspectives. Both methodologies were utilized in rich interchanges between the researcher and participants.

Symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism holds that humans behave toward things (words, objects, behaviors, and others) according to the meanings that are socially constructed about them (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). Spirituality is a complex and multidimensional construct (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Paley, 2007) that holds vastly different symbolic meanings across individual and cultural perspectives (Holloway & Moss, 2010). Social reality is constructed through shared symbols (Fassinger, 2005) that are utilized to understand one another and respond appropriately in the sociocultural context (Greene, Saltman, Cohen, & Kropf, 2009). The researcher and participants conducted active interchanges in which the meaning of words like ‘spirituality’ and ‘dialogue’ were co-constructed (Knauff, 2007) and experiences were explored and elaborated.

Axiology. Axiology concerns the position of values in research (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 127). The understanding of meaning and value is central to constructivism and certainly to such a richly constructed phenomenon as spirituality (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). The researcher’s values, intuition and insights are included within a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and were used as an important tool of the research in my role as a “passionate participant” in this research (Lincoln et al., p. 110). During the entire process the influence of my own value-laden worldview and experiences were acknowledged, taken into account, and considered an inevitable and useful part of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Critical Theory

Some elements of critical theory were pertinent to the purpose and needs of this research. A critical paradigm actively seeks to liberate consciousness and uses the researcher's values and motivations toward giving voice to a group that has not been heard (Ponterotto, 2005). A dialectical approach was utilized in which participants and researcher generated understanding that was ultimately meant to create change in curriculum content on spirituality (Lincoln et al., 2011). Freire (1968) wrote of the importance of the collaboration between the participants and researcher that takes place in critical research to empower through bringing the perspectives and narratives of the oppressed out from silence.

Goodman and Mueller (2009) describe the stigmatization of atheists on college campuses. Studies by Edgell et al. (2006) and Gervais et al. (2011) reveal that atheists are the most distrusted minority in the United States. Little is known about atheists (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Nash, 2003), who are often thought by believers to be less moral than other people due to their lack of belief in God (Johnson et al., 2011). From a critical perspective the current research brings to the dialogue the experiences and perspectives of a sample of atheist social work students to offset a lack of attention to the experience and perspectives of a growing population of atheist and agnostic students. The study was meant to contribute to the inclusion of atheist perspectives in a curriculum that is often focused on religious and other supernatural perspectives (Senreich, 2013). From a critical perspective this study can be viewed as the researcher and participants taking part in a dialectical process of critiquing existing realities to raise consciousness about atheism and atheists. The outcome of this dialectic is an increased awareness on the part of the students and researcher about issues of bias and exclusion of atheist perspectives. The final result of this increased understanding and awareness is ultimately the production of suggestions for change in curriculum content on spirituality (Freire, 1968; Lincoln et al, 2011).

Assumptions and Limitations

This study was intended to explore the perspectives of a small group of social work students to glean information that can improve understanding of atheist social work students and present suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality. Participants were primarily Caucasian females from two Western

universities in the United States. The study is not intended to be representative of the perspectives of all atheist social work students (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011). Students who responded to the invitation to participate may have differed in some ways from those who did not.

The reality of theological and transcendent realms has not been established and can neither be verified nor refuted (MacDonald, 2009; Paley, 2008a). For the purposes of this research I am taking the position that spirituality, however it might be defined—whether in religious, supernatural, existential, or other terms—can best be studied as a constructed phenomenon that arises from biological, psychological, and sociocultural influences (Brandt et al., 2010; Durkheim, 1912/1954; Helminiak, 2008; Kagan, 2008; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003; Tremlin, 2006; Wade, 2009).

A constructivist paradigm recognizes that the researcher's own background and experience will inevitably influence the interpretation of the data (Roeske, 2013). The researcher's particular experiences and knowledge informed the co-construction of realities that arose from her interaction with participants in the research (Charmaz, 2006). The questions I formulated for my interview guide, the literature I chose as pertinent to the study, the conceptualizations that guided my research, and the processes of data collection and analysis were filtered through my individual experiences, knowledge, and perspectives (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz observed that “the very view you have as an observer shapes everything you see” (Puddephatt, 2006, p. 10).

Within certain guidelines, the researcher's role in the research is not considered problematic in qualitative research. Depending on the level of self-awareness the researcher brings to a project, his or her own lived experience and perspective can put the researcher in a good position to obtain rich data through the interaction with participants. If used appropriately, the researcher's experience can bring a higher level of acuity and reflection to the research (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

My position as a researcher who had some experiences and perspectives in common with participants—as used judiciously to formulate clarifying questions and make connections with them—contributed to openness and trust in the process of interviewing (Mueller, 2012). As is customary in

qualitative research (Morrow, 2005) I will state my perspective regarding spirituality. I consider the existence of gods and supernatural realms quite unlikely and tend strongly towards atheism.

Awareness of my preconceptions, assumptions, and reactions was essential for me to remain intentional and open to whatever the data brought to the research (Shaw, Bayne, & Lorelle, 2012). As is usual in constructivist inquiry I strove to remain self-aware of the interaction of my own experiences and perspectives with the research rather than attempting to bracket out the influence of my personal perspectives (Ponterotto, 2005).

Tools I used for this purpose included: (a) consultation with peers about my impressions of the emerging data (Charmaz, 2006); (b) use of the literature to formulate interview questions that could extend the dialogue beyond my expectations about how participants might respond (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003); (c) remaining intentional during the process of data collection and analysis (Shaw et al., 2012); (d) utilizing critical reflection (Puddephatt, 2006; Plack, 2005) through the use of memo writing and reflective journaling to monitor my developing constructions throughout the research (Charmaz, 2006); and (e) the use of an iterative process of member checking for clarification and exploration of emerging ideas and constructs, including consideration of alternative explanations and negative cases (Charmaz, 2006).

The constructivist viewpoint of reality is relativist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and concerned with locally constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The intent of the study was not to achieve representative data but rather to gain some knowledge and understanding of the experiences and perspectives of a small sample of atheist social work students (Kondracki et al., 2002).

Data Collection

Constructivism was deemed the most appropriate approach for the investigation of atheist social work perspectives on spirituality because multiple socially constructed realities within specific contexts are the focus of investigation under a constructivist paradigm (Appleton & King, 2002). A constructivist approach to this type of study typically involves interaction between the researcher and participants (Lichtman, 2013) with an emphasis on gaining understanding of unique meanings (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Interview research was chosen as an appropriate methodology for gathering rich information about the participants' experiences and worldviews (Barriball & While, 1994; Salant & Dillman, 1994). The goal of in-depth interviewing procedures is to gain a deep understanding of a sociocultural phenomenon (Meho, 2006). The interview procedure was designed to elicit an understanding of the meanings participants hold about spirituality, atheism, and their experience of curriculum content on spirituality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Human subject research compliance. This study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of Colorado State University for approval for a human subjects research project and was approved. Richards and Schwartz (2002) note possible harms in qualitative research that should be acknowledged. Spirituality is potentially a sensitive topic and it could be expected that it might bring up issues of past trauma around religion and spirituality. Participants were notified that resources were available if their participation caused any distress.

Participant selection and recruitment. Since the focus of this study was on the experiences and perspectives of atheist social work students, the only demographic that could provide the information I needed consisted of a set of atheist social work student participants. Criterion sampling was used as the only means by which it was possible to obtain rich information about this specific population (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006; Patton, 2002). The criteria for participation were that participants must be social work students in a university setting who identified as atheists. The recruitment invitation (see "Appendix A, Recruitment Invitation") included words other than 'atheist,' such as 'naturalist,' 'agnostic,' 'skeptical,' 'rationalist,' and 'humanist' to invite participation by those who relate to identifiers other than 'atheist.'

Permission was granted to send out recruitment invitations through the listservs of two universities in the western United States with enrollments of from 15,000 to 30,000 students. Flyers were also placed on bulletin boards within the social work departments of the two universities, which both have enrollments of about 350 students. The research setting was the internet, as interviews were conducted through emails between the researcher and atheist-identified social work students from the two universities. One participant volunteered to meet face-to-face after also taking part in the email interview.

As suggested by Mann and Stewart (2000), the recruitment invitation included a description of the study, its purpose, and what would be expected of the participants (see “Appendix A, Recruitment Invitation”). Participants were informed that (a) they were free to quit participation at any time; (b) their information would be kept confidential with only the researcher knowing participant identities; (c) data from the interviews would be kept in digital form and portions would become paper data; (d) names, email addresses, and other identifying information were excluded from the data; and (e) no identifying information was retained in the final data.

Participants from the social work faculty were initially sought as well, but there were no responses from that quarter. It is plausible that there may have been no atheist members of the faculty in the two social work departments from which participants were sought.

Internet interviewing. Within constructivist methodologies, meaning is created out of the interaction between the researcher and participants (Guba, 1990; Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). Reality is considered relative and constructed through an interactive process that is local and temporal (Charmaz, 2000). In constructivist inquiry the interview protocol is designed to elicit rich participant responses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interviews should be flexible and open-ended (Ecklund & Long, 2011) with a focus on the respondents’ own ideas and wording. I sent each participant an initial set of questions to answer because there were some areas of inquiry that I wanted to ask each student.

Interviewing within a constructivist framework involves much more than merely gathering information. It requires “theoretical sensitivity,” an ability to ask appropriate questions with a receptivity to unexplored possibilities and associations (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 135-136). As the primary instrument utilized in the research (Morrow, 2005; Patton, 1990), I served as a “passionate participant” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 110) who displayed an interest in the subject and was involved in the dynamics of co-creation (Guba, 1990). The success of internet interviewing depends in large part on the skills of the interviewer (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006). It was important to examine both manifest content (which is readily evident) and latent content (having a deeper, less evident meaning) (Krippendorff, 2012). My training and

experience as a licensed clinical social worker provided me with skills that were valuable within a constructivist design requiring active listening and dialogue (Penman & Turnbull, 2012).

I created open-ended questions designed to elicit unanticipated responses and to encourage participants to explore perspectives that had not been asked directly (Charmaz, 2006). The following questions were developed from the needs dictated by the research questions (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006):

1. How do you perceive the idea of spirituality?
2. Describe your experience with religion and/or spirituality. How has it affected your life?
3. Do you relate to the idea of spirituality personally or consider yourself a spiritual person in some way? Why or why not?
4. If you once had a religious or theist belief system, why or how did that change?
5. Has your atheism provided any particular challenges for you? To what extent are you open with others about your worldview?
6. What has been your experience of spirituality being presented in the social work curriculum? Has atheism been addressed in your classes?
7. What have you seen as helpful or problematic about how spirituality is presented in the social work curriculum? How do you think social work educators should handle the topic of spirituality?

A pilot study is recommended to test the efficacy of interview questions (Chenail, 2011). I conducted a pilot study in which I sent the initial interview questionnaire to two atheist graduate social work students who do not belong to one of the universities from which I would gather participants. These individuals provided feedback that the questions were engaging and relevant to them and that they seemed to provide opportunities for participants to respond either briefly or to engage in ongoing participation. At their suggestion I added the word ‘personally’ to the third question to differentiate it from the first question more clearly (see “Appendix B: Participant Questionnaire”).

Once eligibility was established and participants agreed to take part in the study by sending me an initial email in response to the recruitment invitation, the interview questions were sent to the participant via email (see “Appendix B, Participant Questionnaire”). The interview questions were embedded within

the email itself rather than attached as suggested by a study by Dommeyer and Moriarty (2000) that indicated participants are more likely to respond when questions are embedded in the email. After participants completed the initial questionnaire further questions were asked of them in an iterative process of theorizing about the data, seeking clarification from participants, and inviting further explorations of constructs and themes that were arising through their responses (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). A series of interview sequences took place after the initial interview questions were received that took the form of questions and responses in an iterative process of dialogue (Charmaz, 2006).

Theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2012) is a method of gathering more data as needed from participants to refine emerging concepts. I conducted theoretical sampling through a series of ongoing emails with participants in which I elaborated upon concepts and asked for clarification and expansion of participant perspectives and experiences. A flexible methodology allowed me to remain focused on the information I wished to gather yet with the flexibility to move into unexpected directions and probe as needed for rich material (Babbie, 1998). I also provided participants with feedback about their responses and validation of their experiences and perspectives.

Internet interviewing holds some advantages that were useful for this research. Recent studies have compared the efficacy of various interview techniques, finding that email interviews tend to be more focused and reflective than ones that are conducted face to face (Curasi, 2001; Meho & Tibbo, 2003; Murray, 2004; Murray & Harrison, 2004). The researcher has the time to thoughtfully formulate responses and probing questions, resulting in increased possibilities for rich data collection and analysis (Karchner, 2001; Murray, 2004). Internet interviews are particularly useful in constructivist research because they allow participants to “construct their own experiences with their own dialogue and interaction with the researcher” (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004).

The anonymity of the email interchanges seemed to encourage self-disclosure (Tidwell & Walther, 2002) and the production of rich material (Opdenakker, 2006). When people exercise self-reflection in their own spaces, they tend to increase self-disclosure (Meho, 2006), and writing answers to

questions tends to result in more abstract responses (Kvale, 1996; Opdenakker). Time and costs were more efficiently utilized due to the immediate accessibility of interview data and the ease of conducting follow-up questioning (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). Joinson (2001) notes that individuals tend to feel freer about disclosure when they cannot be seen by others. While there is a loss of nonverbal cues, research indicates that participants feel they can discuss difficult subjects more readily on the internet than they would in face-to-face interviews (Hunt & McHale, 2007; Opdenakker, 2006). During the interview process participants disclosed personal information and narratives, some more deeply than others. I also made some personal disclosures and provided information that seemed to result in responses going to more abstract levels. It seemed to me that the nonverbal cues and communication that take place during face-to-face interviews were exchanged for a different kind of cue recognition process that is unique to internet communication and that resulted in a rich process of exchange.

The initial target range was from six to twenty participants or until a point of saturation was reached. Ultimately a total of twenty-two social work student participants was obtained, which was judged adequate because the data seemed to have reached a level of theoretical saturation, at least for the purposes of this study (Charmaz, 2012). Four students expressed interest in the study but did not complete the interview. In each of these cases the potential participant sent an email expressing their interest in the study and was sent information about the study and the interview questions twice. Two replied to express their ongoing interest but did not complete the interview and the other two never replied at all.

Face-to-face interview. One participant, after providing two in-depth email responses, volunteered to conduct a face-to-face interview with me that lasted about two hours. There were some notable differences between the two modes of interviewing. I had already gleaned some understanding of Laura's background and perspectives from the two email interchanges we had completed. I found some things we had in common and had discerned her sense of humor, astute perspectives, and honesty from the emails we had exchanged. When we met in person, a deeper intuitive dimension was added through the ability to glean visual and other cues from each other. I found that the email interviews provided a

means to quickly gain a connection with each participant, particularly the ones who emailed with me more than once, but did not give me quite the same level of depth as did the in-person interview.

The face-to-face interview allowed me to conduct immediate theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) during the conversation, adding more depth to the interview process. I felt able to utilize my personality more fully in the face-to-face interview where my participant could experience elements of connection like my particular forms of humor and empathy, and I could more readily experience her personality and cues that could not be read through email interchanges. There were ample opportunities for back-and-forth commentary that provided understandings about latent, rich material. For future research I think it would be optimal to begin with a round of email exchanges and then to conduct at least one face-to-face interview, followed perhaps by a few more clarifying email exchanges. I would expect to have fewer participants but richer data using this process.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the data using a constant comparative method that involved sorting the data into codes, concepts, and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Charmaz's work (1995, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2012) was particularly helpful during the constant comparative coding and analysis process. I found her work to be readily accessible as well as challenging and useful. Charmaz (2001) regards data analysis as a construction the researcher creates out of the data using her own thinking processes. Data analysis was certainly constructed by this researcher's unique combination of perspectives and experiences, exposure to the literature, and skill sets.

The raw data consisted of transcripts of participants' responses to demographic and interview questions as well as subsequent probing and clarifying questions. Words, phrases, and topics were compared to find connections between the data, the participants, and the concepts, moving from lower levels of comparison to higher levels of abstraction (Charmaz, 2006; Krippendorff, 2012; Neuendorf, 2002; Saldaña, 2009). Recurring themes were converted into categories in which the data held together in meaningful conceptual groups that were clearly differentiated (Kondracki et al., 2002). Interview data were reviewed and sorted into codes, concepts, and themes constructed from the data (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Firestone (1990) describes data analysis as nets created by the researcher in which concepts hold the net together in intricate patterns of relationships. This was a useful visualization during data analysis.

Data analysis occurred throughout the data collection and analysis process from the beginning of the study (Charmaz, 2001). An inductive approach was utilized to develop concepts constructed from the data rather than imposing them prior to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Punch, 2005). Analysis moved from a lower to a higher level of abstraction (Puddephatt, 2006) using continual reflection and analysis (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). The process investigated manifest content and moved into latent content (Krippendorff, 2012) and from descriptive material into concepts and conceptualizations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Charmaz (2001) describes the analysis as moving from initial description and beginning analysis towards “rendering a conceptual understanding” of the data (p. 675). For this study, theoretical sampling was used to facilitate the move from descriptive material to conceptual, latent content.

Theoretical sampling is a key feature of the constructivist grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2001), who describes theoretical sampling as a process of continually gathering additional data to refine emerging constructions of concepts (Charmaz, 2012). Dialogic and iterative processes are used as the researcher goes back to participants to fill out tentative concepts and explore emerging conceptualizations (Charmaz, 2006). Follow-up questions were asked of the participants to elaborate on previous responses and elicit more depth and clarification of concepts and perceptions (Meho, 2006). The open-ended nature of the questions and the process of ongoing exploration of emerging ideas facilitated the co-creation of new conceptualizations and interpretations that had not been anticipated when the research was planned.

In the process of theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation is sought rather than data repetition or sampling sufficiency as in post-positivist research (Charmaz, 2012). Theoretical saturation refers to the point at which data collection and analysis have continued until no new data appear and the emerging conceptualizations seem to be well-developed (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004). Participants shared experiences and perspectives which were then expanded upon and clarified by follow-up questions. As

the data accumulated, themes arose which would bring the inquiry back to further questions about particular categories and themes. Elaboration and exploration continued until emerging themes and concepts seemed to be well-developed. Email exchanges continued for as long as participants wished to continue.

Maximum variation is similar to theoretical saturation as an emergent approach in which information from participants informs subsequent samples with the aim of obtaining the richest variation of experiences of a phenomenon (Patton, 2005). As I gathered participant responses, new questions and themes arose which then informed the manner in which I posed subsequent questions, although the same initial interview questions were asked of each participant. As a whole, saturation began to occur as various themes were investigated on the individual participant level and then compared and explored between participants and segments of the data.

Puddephat (2006) recommends using grounded theory techniques to go beyond description into conceptual development. Probing questions and interactions with participants served as a means to delve into latent content with participants to understand important meanings and processes (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the process it was important to let the data speak for themselves (Patton, 2002). Charmaz (2006) recommends grounding the data in the participants' own words and ideas, referred to as 'in vivo' coding. Some in vivo codes reflect condensed ideas or experiences presented in "shorthand terms" that were meaningful within this group of atheist social work students and that seemed to portray their perspective using their unique wording (p. 55). Some excerpts have been quoted verbatim in the Results section when they provide an exemplar of key constructs from the data or express experiences and perspectives that seemed significant in the data.

Organization of the data. I created a Word document for each participant named 'Participant 1,' 'Participant 2,' etc. according to when they first responded to the Participant Questionnaire. The documents did not contain any identifying information. As each participant provided subsequent responses I added their responses to the appropriate documents. I downloaded the data to the qualitative software NVivo.

I developed a ‘key’ document that listed all the participants by name and participant number in order to keep track of responses and maintain confidential data for analysis. I also developed a demographics document to keep track of the demographic data. A total of twenty-two participants responded. I responded to participant emails with comments and questions designed to clarify and elicit rich material about their perspectives and experiences and continued to respond as long as participants were interested in further interaction. Data collection and analysis occurred at the same time as I assessed the utility and fit of emerging codes, examined primary examples, looked for alternative explanations, synchronized the data, and went back to participants for more elaboration on themes (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011).

Interview process. Data analysis took place simultaneously with data collection because analysis of incoming data resulted in further collection of data for clarification and expansion of concepts and experiences (Charmaz, 1995). The interview questions and responses took the form of ongoing dialogic conversations designed to explore each participant’s experience and perspective in depth (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). I read through the data as it was coming in, familiarizing myself with the experience of the participants both singly and as a group in order to ask pertinent questions. Flexibility was maintained during the interview process to allow for exploration of unanticipated themes in the course of the interviews (Kondracki et al., 2002).

Questions were designed to check for accuracy, obtain clarification, check with participants to ensure I was understanding their meaning, expand upon participant feelings and actions, and to ask about new topics (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). I also provided encouragement, thanks, and validation for the participants’ involvement in the study and for the personal growth and insights that they shared.

Analysis of the data. No definitive guidelines exist concerning exactly how to go about constant comparison of the data (Boeije, 2002). According to Eisner (1998), the “paucity of methodological prescriptions” is due to the fact that qualitative research focuses not on standardization but on the effective use of the researcher to obtain data that is useful to the study (p. 169).). I utilized guidelines gleaned from the literature that provided the study with awareness and structure.

All data was considered and compared in a systematic way to ensure that all data are considered (Elliott & Jordan, 2010). While coding, I kept in the foreground the meanings, emotions, and phenomena that seemed of deep significance to the participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2000). My focus remained on seeking meaning and moving beyond first-level meanings. Higher-level coding processes involve a process of creating new connections between the data and emerging conceptual associations while examining how the data fit or contradict one's emerging conceptualizations (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). As the co-producer of the data (Charmaz, 1995) I was an active participant in the production of the data and the interpretations and meanings that I observed and described (p. 36).

When responses from participants ended I chose to do some analysis by hand prior to utilizing the qualitative research software NVivo because I thought it would provide a richer sense of the whole (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). I read the entire data through several times to get a broad sense of the data. I then printed out a copy of the data and completed a coding sequence by hand, writing notes in the margins about recurring themes, important ideas, and possible connections. In this process I circled important words and phrases, wrote speculative notes in the margins, and formulated some early tentative codes. I completed a second sequence of coding in this manner without reference to the first coding sequence and then compared them.

After completing two run-throughs of hand-coding using sets of the data that were printed out, I put the data into NVivo by participant and also created categories which the program calls 'Nodes.' This began a more systematic level of analysis. During the process of data collection and analysis, I recorded my thoughts about the incoming data and my reactions to them in a reflective journal and memos. The first level of analysis in NVivo involved delineating codes and higher levels of analysis involved identifying connections between codes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The process moved from simple coding of data fragments into higher conceptualizations involving similar and divergent concepts, deeper experiences and perspectives of the participants, and comparing themes that came out of participant experiences and perspectives as a whole (Elliott & Jordan, 2010).

Codebook development. A codebook is vital to the research because it comprises a “formalized operationalization of the codes” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 138). The creation of the codebook is a critical part of data analysis and consists of creating a set of codes with their definitions that become the guide for the assignment of codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane). Key examples of the data coded for each code were included in the codebook. As the data were analyzed, the codebook changed to reflect developing categories and their relationships. There were several iterations of the codebook of emerging themes and their definitions. Codes were added and dropped as appropriate during data analysis.

Codes emerged from the data rather than from conceptualizations from the literature (Charmaz, 2006), yet the knowledge I gained from the literature also informed the development of codes because I was aware of certain processes that were already known. My attention was on levels of meaning and connections between emerging categories (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The process of analysis involved flexibility, creativity, and remaining aware of the “constructivist intent” of the study (Mills et al., 2006, p. 6). As codes emerged I operationalized them and assigned data to them (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane). In many instances more than one code was applied to the same data segments. There were four iterations of the codebook with tweaking in between.

Theoretical frameworks for analysis. The theoretical framework of this study was an important foundation and guide for the codebook during the entire process of data collection and analysis. For the purposes of this study spirituality is considered a human construct arising from a complex interplay of psychological, biological, sociocultural, and neurological factors (Ponterotto, 2005) with human constructs of spirituality having both diverse and multidimensional forms (Barker & Floersch, 2010; Paley, 2007).

Constructivism holds that reality is subjective and relative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research was guided by attention to the human understanding, meaning, and experience (Willis, 2007) that is acquired through the interaction between the researcher and participants (Mills et al., 2006). Hermeneutic theory provided a theoretical guide for attending to hidden meaning that requires deep reflection and a dialogic process to bring out (Schwandt, 2000). Narrative theory called attention to the importance of

narrative in spiritual worldviews and personal stories (Hodge, 2006). Ethnography pointed to the importance of sociocultural practices and the interplay of different cultures on human interactions. Symbolic interactionism provided a lens for investigating how atheist students navigate communication using symbols that are very much different from those that usually define spirituality in the curriculum (Greene et al., 2009). Critical theory provided a lens for the examination of atheist social work students as a marginalized group of people whose voice seems to be excluded at present in curriculum content on spirituality.

I remained immersed in the data during data collection, moving back and forth from data already developed and codes that were emerging to new information from participants. As new data was gathered, theoretical frameworks from the literature were examined and compared to emerging themes and conceptualizations. This process was meant to ensure that participant narratives were embedded within theoretical frameworks from the literature (Charmaz, 2000). Writing up the results took place in stages and comprised yet another level of analysis. Participants' experiences were necessarily evoked through my own experience and perspective. Under a constructivist paradigm the researcher's perspective is included in the analysis because knowledge consists of the co-construction of realities produced by the interaction between the researcher and participants (Lincoln & Lynham, 1994).

The outcome of data analysis was the development of an emergent conceptual framework for understanding the experience and perspective of spirituality of this particular sample of atheist social work students (Lynham, 2002). Interactions with the data and with the literature resulted in an emergent curricular model that educators can utilize in curriculum content on spirituality and worldviews.

Quality of the Study

Morrow (2005) notes that particular conceptualizations of quality and trustworthiness emerge from the paradigm that directs the research. This constructivist research project was concerned with the meanings and experiences of atheist social work students within a university setting. Schwandt (1994) writes that functional fit is the most important consideration for evaluating the quality of research. According to Eisner (1997), the most important aspect of a qualitative study is its utility—whether it can

assist in understanding a perplexing issue. If my study has quality the rich descriptions it produces (Ponterotto, 2005) may provide an understanding of the lived experience of this specific group of atheist social work students about spirituality and curriculum content on spirituality.

Standards for assessing rigor are not well developed in qualitative inquiry because the nature of qualitative research is flexibility and creativity used to obtain the rich material that is required (Charmaz, 2001). Toma (2011) recommends developing one's own standards for rigor by becoming familiar with qualitative standards and applying them pragmatically to your current research. There are no standards that can assure that research actually has quality, but I worked to "minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 110) using the tools I chose as appropriate for the needs of my study (Toma, 2011).

Under a constructivist lens this study has goodness insofar as it is trustworthy and can authentically represent and construct new understandings of atheist social work student perspectives on spirituality and then serve as a catalyst for change in curriculum content on spirituality (Lincoln et al., 2011). The ideas that are being developed seem consistent with the data and have been evaluated and adjusted as needed throughout the study (Bryman, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). Quality standards in qualitative research have been described using a variety of terms and conceptualizations (Morrow, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) elaborated on the following quality criteria which were originally designed to loosely parallel the quality standards used in traditional research methods (Morrow, 2005):

Authenticity. Authenticity was an important consideration for this study because its main purpose was to contribute to curriculum content on spirituality (Toma, 2011). Guba and Lincoln (1994) elucidated a number of elements of authenticity: (a) Ontological authenticity assesses the extent to which participants' constructions "have evolved in a meaningful way" (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008, p. 8); (b) educative authenticity is indicated by the fact that participants and researcher experience increased understanding of the phenomenon under study through a dialogic process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989); (c) catalytic authenticity is demonstrated by precipitating action and change as a result of the understandings that participants have gained (Onwuegbuzie et al.); (d) tactical authenticity refers to participants

becoming equipped to take action from what they have learned through their participation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008); and, finally, (e) Guba and Lincoln note that the study should have fairness, meaning that a full range of perspectives are represented, including outliers or unusual cases (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Overall, the authenticity of this study would refer to its producing increased understanding about how atheists perceive and experience the phenomenon of spirituality (Guba & Lincoln) as well as stimulating action towards change in curriculum content on spirituality (Lincoln et al., 2011; Plack, 2005).

Throughout the study my focus was on the co-creation of genuine and authentic representations of participant perspectives of the phenomenon of spirituality, keeping in mind the practical outcome of contributing to understandings of atheist students and their experience and perspectives of content on spirituality in the social work curriculum. I encouraged ongoing dialogue through follow-up questions designed to elaborate on ideas and experiences and create an open and empowering dialogue for students who have been marginalized and misunderstood (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Hwang et al., 2011).

Some participants reported experiencing an increased understanding of their own perspectives and experiences through their participation and thanked me for the opportunity to take part in the study. The interviews seemed to encourage open and rich reflections between the participants and researcher. Participants were able to advocate for the inclusion of atheist perspectives and brought new ideas that were then considered in the light of current literature to formulate suggestions for change in curriculum content on spirituality.

Trustworthiness. I am using a trustworthiness approach, which investigates the credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability of a research project (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Trustworthiness pertains to goodness relating to methodological and analytic practices (Erlander, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Credibility. Credibility is indicated by the existence of a logical consistency and flow between the data and the conclusions that are made (Hammersley, 1990). The questions that are posed should

result in the production of meaningful data (Fram, 2013). To maintain credibility I worked to offset the chance of coming to incorrect conclusions by utilizing member checks to make certain that the representations I was coming up with were faithful to participant representations of their experiences and perspectives. The terminology ‘incorrect conclusions’ refers to conclusions that might not be in line with participant perceptions. I rechecked the literature, had discussions with peers about the connections and conclusions I was making, and managed discrepant or counter material by asking for clarification from participants (Toma, 2011).

Transferability. Transferability is important in applied research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This aspect of trustworthiness was important to this study because my intent was to advocate for the inclusion of atheist perspectives and to make recommendations for curriculum content on spirituality. I gave rich descriptions that included direct quotations from participants of particularly explanatory or compelling material—especially quotes that were exemplars of important categories—in order that readers can determine if the material could be useful for their purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I examined linkages between the data, the literature, and the tentative conclusions I was making (Maxwell & Rossman, 2011). The practice of this triangulation was not to verify but to ensure that emerging evaluations were evolving in response to the data (Toma, 2011).

Dependability. Dependability concerns the extent to which findings are consistent with other research in the same area of study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Maxwell and Rossman (2011) provide some guidelines for dependability which I have taken into account: (a) my research design seems congruent with my research questions and the goal of the study; (b) my role as the researcher and co-creator of knowledge in the study has been explicated; (c) a protocol was established and the steps taken for data collection and analysis were recorded; (d) the analytical base of the study was made clear; and (e) I as the researcher have been active in challenging assumptions and investigating alternative explanations.

Confirmability. Confirmability is demonstrated when the research is shaped by the participants’ perspectives rather than the researcher’s expectations or motivations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The influence of the researcher is understood and taken into account. The output seems to give a good

representation of the kinds of constructions and experiences of spirituality that are held by the participants in the study (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The study is localized and the findings are not expected to be transferable to other settings so much as useful, particularly for curriculum content on spirituality. A thoughtful and thorough literature search was conducted and the researcher continued to compare emerging conceptualizations with the literature during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Quality as process. According to Lamnek (1998), qualitative data have the potential for higher quality than do quantitative data because it can be checked and expanded upon during the research process. Charmaz (2006) encourages testing and expanding upon evolving conceptualizations throughout the research. Memos were used as a form of interaction with the data in which I considered, questioned and clarified interpretations about what was going on in the data (Charmaz, 2012, p. 8). Under a constructivist paradigm that seeks rich description through dialogic and iterative processes (Schwandt, 2000), qualitative researchers can delve more and more deeply into the meanings that are being examined (Lamnek, 1998). Strategies for quality in this constructivist design that sought rich descriptions included member checking, triangulation, and prolonged engagement with participants (Cho & Trent, 2006). Maxwell (1996) notes that these methods cannot be used as if they were “magical charms” that can produce quality in themselves (p. 88), but attention to recommended quality strategies were helpful in the attempt to produce quality research.

Member checks took the form of repeating important concepts back to the participants in the form of questions and comments, checking if emerging interpretations were accurate, and eliciting further thoughts and clarification from participants. A kind of cross-verification of concepts was conducted through reviewing the literature about particular concepts that were coming up, conducting an extensive in-person interview, and discussion with atheist peers who were not part of the study. Engagement with participants lasted as long as participants would allow and/or until no new concepts seemed to be arising from the data (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

Cho and Trent (2006) describe quality as a process rather than something that can be “achieved” (p. 326). Research procedures are appropriately used as “self-correcting mechanisms” to safeguard the

quality of a study (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 9). Morse et al. advocate that the researcher use flexibility and sensitivity with a willingness to change direction as needed throughout the research process. Kvale (1989) notes the researcher must be alert to correct errors before they subvert the research. Validation of a qualitative study consists of the process of ongoing questioning and theorizing (Kvale). Areas for questioning include evaluating sampling sufficiency (which refers to theoretical saturation); checking for congruence between the research questions, methodologies, and emerging conceptualizations; incorporating unexpected data or perspectives that were not anticipated; and collecting and analyzing data concurrently (Charmaz, 2006). Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe a process of “progressive subjectivity” (p. 238) in which the researcher actively monitors her assumptions and developing constructions during the research. This study focused on a phenomenon that is broad and multidimensional (Barker & Floersch, 2010) that could be expected to produce at least some unexpected results due to the variability and uniqueness of each participant’s experience and perspective. In addition, my own experiences and perspectives had an active role in the manner in which I conducted data collection and analysis through the use of self (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Use of Self

Quality in constructivist research is relational (Lincoln, 1995), having to do with the use of self as the primary instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). During the study it was important to acknowledge the influence of my own constructions, experiences and perspectives on the research (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The subjective and interpersonal nature of the research necessitated an ongoing exploration of both how my experiences and perspectives were affecting the research and how the research was affecting me. Reflexivity is an ongoing practice of self-awareness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) that qualitative researchers must use to evaluate the influences of their experiences, knowledge, expectations, preconceptions, and perspectives on the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Memoing is a technique in which the researcher takes notes on her thoughts and emerging conceptualizations during the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The exercise of writing helped me formulate ideas as I pondered the data, went back to the literature, used theoretical sampling (Charmaz,

2006), and pondered the relationship of the emerging data to my own perspectives and experiences. Memoing, reflective journaling, and consultation with peers were helpful as means of observing and recording my reactions and perspectives prior to and during the research (Lincoln, 2002; Rodwell, 1998).

My experience as a psychotherapist in public mental health provided a good background of creating empathic connections with new and different types of people. The email interviewing technique probably limited this strength somewhat, as I could not use the visual and other cues that one uses as a therapist as fully in the email interviewing format. I think additional strengths were my sense of curiosity and a “theoretical agnosticism” about what might arise from the data (Charmaz, 2012b, p. 4).

I brought my own experiences and perspectives to the study, which had the advantage of creating connections with participants as one who had some things in common with them. My experience as a therapist enabled me to set aside some of my own reactions so as not to hinder the free flow of participant ideas and unexpected directions in the email conversations. At the same time, the study was conducted under a constructivist paradigm and the participants and I were in a process of co-creation of knowledge (Mills et al., 2006). My goal was to represent participant perspectives as authentically as possible (Maxwell, 1996). I utilized memoing and talking with colleagues to sort through the various reactions and thoughts that came up for me through conducting the study. As the primary instrument of the research (Morrow, 2005), I hope that participant perspectives were brought forth genuinely and richly by having moved through me.

Expected Outcomes

It is hoped that the knowledge about the experiences of this sample of atheist social work students and the suggestions that come from their contributions can be used to benefit curriculum content on spirituality. The ultimate outcome may be a contribution to the process of equipping social workers to address spirituality and worldviews with both their religious and nonreligious clients more effectively and compassionately (Gilligan & Furness, 2006). New knowledge about atheists and how they perceive and experience spirituality is available from this study and may produce recommendations for the social work curriculum on spirituality.

There is evidence that atheists suffer from the effects of stereotypes and misconceptions about their worldview (Caldwell-Harris, et al., 2011; Fitzgerald, 2003; Flynn, 2009). Class discussions that include discussion about atheist worldviews may help students better understand the dynamics of various worldviews (Bainbridge, 2005). The inclusion of dialogue about both theist and nontheist worldviews in curriculum content on spirituality can help students learn dialogic processes in which critical thinking and compassion can be used to mitigate reactivity and increase understanding (Knitter, 2010; Northcut, 2004). Skills such as these can be translated into effective social work practice skills.

Summary

The goal of this study was to investigate the perspectives and experiences of atheist social work students within a university setting about spirituality and its inclusion in the social work curriculum. The purpose of the research is to inform curriculum content on spirituality about atheist perspectives and experiences of spirituality. Criterion sampling was used because I sought participants who could provide rich data (Patton, 2002). Selection criteria were that participants were social work students in a university setting and that they were atheists. Internet recruitment and data collection were utilized due to several advantages of internet use: the internet has been shown to encourage frankness about difficult subjects (Meho, 2006); writing is optimal for gaining rich material (Kvale, 1996); and the researcher can readily acquire follow-up data as needed through dialogic interchanges (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006).

A constructivist approach comprised the main methodological framework for this study and is considered the most appropriate paradigm for an investigation of a socially constructed phenomenon like spirituality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Methodological tools that informed this project included hermeneutics, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, ethnography, grounded theory, and symbolic interactionism. Goodness and quality were evaluated using the trustworthiness approach developed by Guba and Lincoln (1994).

Internet interviewing was chosen as an effective means to obtain data from atheist social work students from two western American universities. Open-ended questions were used to obtain rich information and were followed up using theoretical sampling techniques to elaborate themes and elicit

clarification (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis was conducted using a constant comparative method elaborated by Charmaz (1995, 2001, 2006, 2012). The results of this study will be submitted to an academic social work journal and are meant to contribute useful suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality in social work education.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The findings presented in this chapter are the product of interviews with twenty-two atheist social work students who were recruited from the social work departments of two universities in the western United States. All participants were social work students with about half enrolled in a bachelor's program and the other half in a master's program. One additional participant was enrolled in a doctoral program.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to learn about the perspectives and experiences of social work students who identify as atheist. The research questions guiding this study were: (a) What kind of conceptualizations and experiences does a sample of atheist university social work students hold about spirituality and (b) How might their experiences and conceptualizations contribute to curriculum content on spirituality in the social work curriculum?

A constructivist methodology was utilized because it was deemed the most suitable methodology for the subject matter. Under this paradigm knowledge consists of the co-construction of knowledge produced by the interaction between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interview research was chosen as the most appropriate means of gathering information about the experiences and perspectives of a group of atheist social work students. Invitations for participation were sent out on the social work listservs of the two universities. Each student who responded to the invitation was then sent further information about the study and received an identical set of initial open-ended interview questions. The initial set of interview questions consisted of the following:

1. How do you perceive the idea of spirituality?
2. Describe your experience with religion and/or spirituality. How has it affected your life?
3. Do you relate to the idea of spirituality personally or consider yourself a spiritual person in some way? Why or why not?
4. If you once had a religious or theist belief system, why or how did that change?
5. Has your atheism provided any particular challenges for you? To what extent are you open with others about your worldview?

6. What has been your experience of spirituality being presented in the social work curriculum?
Has atheism been addressed in your classes?

7. What have you seen as helpful or problematic about how spirituality is presented in the social work curriculum? How do you think social work educators should handle the topic of spirituality?

Participants were each sent an initial set of open-ended questions (see “Appendix B: Participant Questionnaire”). The researcher commented on participants’ initial responses and provided further questions for clarification and further exploration. Interviews were conducted using emails sent back and forth between the researcher and participants. Member checking was utilized continually as the researcher asked for clarification and provided feedback with each set of responses. The data consist of the responses participants provided to the initial set of interview questions as well as their subsequent replies.

This chapter is organized into sections that describe participant demographics and characteristics, the major themes from the data, and a short summary. Themes were constructed out of participant responses to questions about their experiences and perspectives. Participant responses included numerous suggestions for the improvement of classroom content on spirituality. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant confidentiality. For purposes of clarity minor changes in punctuation or wording have been made to a few of the direct quotations in this chapter.

The process of commenting upon and eliciting further responses between the researcher and participants was continued according to each participant’s desire for continued participation. Four participants responded to only the initial questionnaire and did not respond further. The average number of responses per participant was 3.45. The span of time between my first contact with a participant who completed the questionnaire to the last contact was 14 weeks. Table 1 gives the number of responses each participant provided, including their initial response consisting of answering the initial questionnaire. The time span of responses in this table refers to the time between the participant’s first response to the questionnaire and their last response.

Table 1

Participant Responses and Timeline

Participant	Number of Responses	Time Span of Responses
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1	6	14 weeks
2	4	3 days
3	3	3 days
4	4	12 weeks
5	3	4 weeks
6	2	3 days
7	3	5 days
8	1	1 day
9	3	6 days
10	4 (1 in person)	5 weeks
11	1	1 day
12	1	1 day
13	6	11 days
14	5	9 days
15	5	6 days
16	3	5 days
17	4	4 weeks
18	1	1 day
19	4	4 weeks
20	4	10 days
21	2	2 weeks
22	6	2 weeks

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Participants were recruited from the listservs of two Western American university social work departments using a participation invitation that requested atheist social work student participants (see Appendix A: Recruitment Invitation). The participants were almost overwhelmingly Caucasian females divided about equally between bachelor's and master's levels with one doctoral student. There were three male participants out of a total of twenty-two participants. The high percentage of female participants is consistent with United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) report that 82% of social workers are female. The majority of participants were raised in religious homes. Students either identified as atheists, agnostics, or naturalists, with some providing other identifiers along with the word 'atheist' or 'agnostic' (for example: 'atheist/naturalist').

Fifteen participants gave their "current worldview" as atheist (using the word 'atheist,' 'humanist,' or 'naturalist,' or a combination of 'atheist' with another descriptor). Those who identified as 'agnostic' did not endorse a complete epistemic neutrality. Those who gave their "current worldview" as agnostic or a combination of 'agnostic' with another descriptor indicated in the interview data that they had a lack of theistic beliefs, which is the definition of 'atheist' (Cliteur, 2009). Caldwell-Harris et al.

(2011) note that some who identify as atheists choose not to use that terminology. For instance, Anne wrote, “I don’t like the word agnosticism because it seems to give credence to the idea of God, but it makes more sense philosophically because you can’t claim absolute certainty about things you can’t prove.” Some participants wanted to adopt identifiers other than simply ‘atheist’ because as Shannon wrote, “by definition, I am atheist, but I am so much more than that.”

One described herself as a ‘Christian atheist’ to describe both her adherence to the Golden Rule taught by Jesus and her lack of belief in the supernatural aspects of Christianity. Some related to a strong sense of the interconnectedness of the natural world and referred to themselves as naturalists. The idea that humans evolve and develop their moral norms from sociocultural interactions provided the rationale for identification as humanist. Meghan wrote, “It is our ability to evolve and socialize that makes the norms for our society (and makes it) possible to treat others with respect and kindness.”

Table 2 provides demographics including level of academic program, gender, ethnicity, current participant worldview identifiers, and the worldview that featured in their upbringing.

Table 2
Demographics of Atheist Social Work Students in Study

Demographics of Atheist Social Work Students in Study									
Level	Gender		Ethnicity		Religious Upbringing		Current Worldview		
BSW	9	Female	19	Caucasian	20	Nonreligious	2	Atheist	10
MSW	12	Male	3	Biracial	1	Religious	20	Agnostic	4
Ph.D.	1			Not provided	1	Catholic	6	Atheist/agnostic	1
						Christian	6	Atheist/naturalist	1
						Pentecostal	2	Christian atheist	1
						Jewish	1	Naturalist	1
						Mormon	1	Naturalist, apatheist	1
						Lutheran	1	Agnostic/humanist	1
						Presbyterian	1	Agnostic/questioning	1
						Methodist	1	Agnostic, leaning	1
						Catholic father, atheist mother	1	towards atheism	

It should be noted that in the following narratives, use of the term ‘participants’ (as, for instance, in ‘participants noted,’ does not indicate that every one of the participants had the exact experience or perspective that is being discussed. Instead, it indicates that a number of participants provided rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Perspectives on Current Curriculum Content on Spirituality

Participants noted that spirituality was addressed as a dimension of cultural competency but little information was provided on specific methods that could be used to address spirituality in practice. A majority of participants mentioned that the curriculum did not seem adequate for its purpose of preparing students for practice with clients in the realm of religion and spirituality. Participants reported that class material did cover the importance of religion and spirituality to clients and the need for social workers to understand something about the religious and spiritual beliefs likely to be encountered in the field. They also felt that coursework did not provide enough of the practice skills they would need to work with clients around worldviews.

A quarter of participants noted that spirituality seemed to be assumed as legitimate in curriculum content and that it was difficult to challenge this assumption. Shannon observed that Christianity seems to be presented somewhat inadvertently as the norm when religion is discussed. Laura's experience was that her entire cohort seemed to assume everyone in the class was a Christian. Several noted the absence of discussion about religions other than Christianity. Most other participants also remarked on the absence of discussion of nonreligious spiritual perspectives, atheist perspectives, and other worldviews. Typical comments included, "I have never once heard or read anything about atheism in social work classes, nor found it in literature I've been assigned to read" (Ashley); "atheism has not yet made an appearance" (Melanie), and "atheism has only been addressed by me" (Morgan). Laura remarked, "When we talked about spiritual needs, the atheists had to put up our hands and say hey, let me inform you about a whole segment of students and clients that are out there."

Students discussed specific assignments that were given in their classes. Some involved experiential exercises in which students were asked to explore their spirituality in some way. These exercises ranged from art projects done together in class to discussions about what spirituality means. Anne attended a specific class on spirituality in which there were exercises pertinent to various religions. In one class session, Native American spirituality was explored and students had the experience of picking their 'spirit animal.' In another session students explored Eastern religions through meditation and a discussion about reincarnation. She found the exercises very interesting and noted they built a

strong class cohesiveness. She reported an absence of acknowledgement about atheism and an assumption that everyone had or should have some kind of spirituality. She did not mention her atheism in class because “she felt it would be taken as putting a wet blanket” on the activity.

A common assignment participants experienced in classes involved students making a presentation in class about their own religion or spirituality. Students mentioned that in most cases, anyone could opt out of making the presentation for their own privacy. The wording of some assignments contained assumptions that every student identified with religion or spirituality. For example, there was one about “exploring a faith community that is different from your own” that was mentioned by many students and seemed to appear frequently in content on spirituality. Participants described speaking up about assumptions and having to risk seeming rude to do so. Laura said although she spoke in what she thought was a brief and matter-of-fact manner, some students expressed that they were offended or hurt by her mentioning that not everybody in the class held religious beliefs.

Participants thought that commonly occurring assignments in which students explore their own spirituality need to be reevaluated. They felt class exercises sometimes resembled spiritual self-help group activities and that more useful exercises could be developed that would help students understand spiritual perspectives different from their own. Anne mentioned that in her experience assignments in which students explored their spirituality in some way could be enjoyable but also “kind of touchy-feely.” Such exercises could be informative and fun but also seemed to participants somewhat inappropriate or irrelevant as learning tools for the purpose of the class. One example of self-exploration of one’s spirituality that was considered perhaps inappropriate for a university class was an assignment in which the class created artwork using feathers and beads to ‘express their spirituality.’

Jessica considered it more important to discuss religion and spirituality from the aspect of client worldviews. She pointed out that the focus of a social work class on spirituality ought to be on preparing students to appropriately handle religion and spirituality with their clients. Leslie explained, “I do not really believe anything about a social workers’ religion is relevant. It (should be) all about the clients.”

Shannon described a class assignment that she thought was particularly appropriate. She said the

professor had each student take an online quiz about their “actual beliefs.” The quiz had students check off spiritual beliefs and phenomena and match these with specific spiritual belief systems that contained those ideas or beliefs. Shannon thought similar exercises could benefit students by helping them look beyond the labels people may tend to assign for themselves and others. She thought people often look at labels rather than what people really think or believe, and stated, “(If we all took this test) we could better help clients because we would begin to see similarities between us and our clients rather than dwelling on the differences.”

Several participants mentioned incidents in which students seemed to be taking opportunities to promote their religious views in class. They also voiced that it was not that the religious students were talking about their religious beliefs that participants found inappropriate. Rather, the idea that their religious views held an ultimate truth that others needed to adopt was deemed antithetical to the social work values of client empowerment and neutrality. In line with their view that social workers should be focused on their clients’ well-being instead of their own spirituality, participants noted that religious believers need to be expressly taught that proselytization is not professionally appropriate.

An important concept brought up by half the participants was that no matter what kind of religious, spiritual, or naturalist belief a person has, all students need to learn to handle their own biases and assumptions in order to help clients. These participants felt that the curriculum was not addressing the issue of biases and assumptions. As Anne wrote,

As future social workers we need to be helping our clients investigate how their thought processes can be healthy or unhealthy for them. That requires an ability to look at our own ideas critically. We can’t just be evaluating everybody else’s. And our job is to help clients help themselves.

Half the clients noted that the curriculum completely neglected what they thought was the most important goal of the curriculum, which was to learn to address spirituality and religion with clients in practice. On the other hand, Hannah wrote that she liked how spirituality was addressed in her social work classes “because it was very client based.” Similarly, Dave noted that his experience of spirituality in the curriculum taught him how to use spirituality as a strength for clients.

Themes: Participant Experiences and Perspectives

Themes are organized by the major topics that were covered by most of the participants. The exercise of constructing themes was a subjective pursuit with the purpose of designating useful themes out of the material provided by the participants of this study. Participants provided comments on a number of areas that had not been the subject of initial interview questions. The major themes from the data are: (a) developing as atheists against the grain of a religious environment; (b) personal reliance on reason; (c) nonsupernatural perspectives of spirituality; (d) challenges in interactions with believers; (e) inclusion and dialogue; and (f) a more professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality. Figure 2 illustrates the major themes and subthemes from the data.



Figure 2. Major themes and subthemes from the data.

A numeral indicates how many participants mentioned each theme and subtheme. The numbers give indication that there was some consensus about these themes but does not indicate that any theme

should be considered more important than others with fewer numbers. There is rich material and depth to each of these themes and subthemes (Patton, 1990).

Developing as atheists against the grain of a religious environment. Most participants (twenty out of twenty-two) were raised in religious households. Of these, all were raised in homes comprising some variant of Christianity except for one participant who was raised in a Jewish household. Most of the students who were raised in religious households came from either Catholic or evangelical households. Two participants reported being raised in nonreligious homes and one was raised by a Catholic father and an atheist mother.

Development against the grain. Unlike the experience of those who adopt the worldview of their culture and families, these atheist students had to develop their worldview against the tide of a religious upbringing. Some participants expressed that they had begun to feel a divide between their observations of the world and the religious teachings of their families and cultures even as children. Many expressed that they learned to be cautious about expressing their ideas and doubts about religious beliefs.

Meghan discussed the process of realizing there were other people who did not believe in the religious and supernatural beliefs that she was finding implausible. She drew a comparison between growing up gay in a straight world to growing up as a nonbeliever in a religious world:

The relation to gender is very interesting; I have heard stories of people knowing they were different but did not know they were gay until they met another gay person or heard the term. This is similar to how I feel about exploring and discovering (my atheism).

April attributes her ability to assume an atheist worldview to “being well read, having a fiercely independent personality, and truly just wanting to answer my own questions.” Anne observed that becoming an atheist within a religious family and community may require certain characteristics:

Atheists have to develop our perspective against the grain of society. Our families and communities for the most part accept Christianity as the default position. I think we might share a quality of being able to think from a broader view that is larger than our small piece of the sociocultural scene. We are able to take in academic subjects, use our curiosity, and examine what we think is going on from what is maybe a more observant and reflective place.

Dissonance. Despite the preponderance of religious perspectives in their families and communities, participants reported noting a dissonance between their personal observations of reality and

religious teachings. Participant descriptions of their upbringing provide a view of children and youth who observed beliefs and behaviors within their families and communities that became increasingly foreign to them. Many participants wrote that the process of rejecting religion was a growing realization that a disconnect existed between the tenets espoused by their church and their experience of the realities of the world. Ashley noted, “As I got older, I began to realize Christianity and the bible made zero sense to me.” Heather wrote, “I found myself questioning more and drifting away from religion.” Laura noted that she “did try to believe, but it all seemed like the worst kind of mind control and brainwashing.”

Participants frequently reported questioning religious ideas at about the time they reached elementary school age. Mike was only six years old when he remembers developing a fear that someone in his family would die. He recalls praying that his family would remain safe but quickly realizing that he actually did not believe in God. He told no one about this realization but afterwards “stopped saying (‘under God’) during the Pledge of Allegiance every morning.”

Three participants discussed what seemed to them in childhood a strange similarity in Santa and Jesus stories. Both stories were about beings that had supernatural qualities and were interested in observing their “good or bad” behaviors. These students reported finding it odd that their parents supported their eventually discarding the idea of Santa as they grew older, yet continued to expect them to believe in the veracity of religious stories they found equally implausible. Shannon recalls praying when she was growing up even though she thought of God as “just an imaginary figure that I prayed to who was akin to a Santa Claus-like figure in the sky.” Similarly, Jessica describes her process of attempting to believe what her family and community were telling her were true:

I was raised Christian but always felt very uncomfortable in church or with the notion of an all-powerful being. The stories always seemed exactly that: stories, presented as fact. I began questioning religion around the age of 10. I cannot pinpoint a specific reason; it just always felt like a fairy tale to me, like Jack and the bean stalk, or the three blind mice.

Participants report making observations about their world that seemed dissonant with religious teachings. They noticed that prayers were not answered and that adults did not have satisfactory answers to their questions about religion. Older children noted inconsistencies in the Bible. Stephanie noticed

differences between her church's rhetoric about helping the poor and what she saw as an actual focus on expensive church renovations. Participants perceived discrepancies between religious teachings and what they were being taught in school, particularly in science classes. Anne noted that:

Science classes gave actual reasons for the way the world worked that made sense, and it was clear that scientists and historians were willing to change their minds with new evidence. It never made sense to go through the mental gyrations necessary to hold onto belief in religious stories.

Leslie grew up in a religiously practicing Jewish family. She had the experience of questioning her faith at a very young age "due to the history, annihilation and destruction of the Jewish people." As she grew up the sense of social justice she first developed as a young child significantly influenced her worldview decisions. She notes she does not believe in the common folk spirituality adage that 'things happen for a reason,' noting she does not believe that slavery, rape, or the higher percentage of racial minorities who live in poverty occur "because it was fate or supposed to be like that," but rather happen due to injustice and inequality.

Adolescence was an important time for worldview development as participants began to question and conduct the tasks of growing up and individuating themselves. They became increasingly aware that their thoughts and perspectives were irreconcilable with religious tenets. Ashley writes, "I began to form my view of the world as an adolescent . . . I was a science nerd, and evolution made sense." Heather describes that as she entered high school:

I began to question more and think critically about a lot of things: politics, religion, friendships, etc. This was a time of personal growth and change for me, and I ultimately decided that organized religion didn't fit the person I had become.

Melanie reported she attended church for some time in her teens, but "never truly felt comfortable during the services, almost like a fraud, so I chose to discontinue my attendance." Stephanie spent some time in the Catholic church during the period of time when youth her age were confirmed into the church. She went along with the cultural expectations of her family but did not continue her involvement with religion after her confirmation. She notes that one particular year was significant in her life because in that same year she was both confirmed into her church and later rejected religion. Her transition came about after she began to discuss science and social issues with friends.

Exposure to academics at school, having friends who held different worldviews, reading, and activities beyond their church were all significant influences on participant explorations of alternative worldviews. Hannah wrote: “Once I stopped being forced to go to church and became friends with people outside of the church, I realized the church did not offer a lifestyle that I wanted to follow.” Stephanie expanded her knowledge about science and the cosmos in her sophomore year of high school. She remembered, “I began to listen more closely during mass and I remember thinking over and over again how could the priest know with all certainty that something was God’s will.”

Several mention college as the point at which they fully rejected their religious beliefs. As they examined and rejected supernatural ideas, participants began to examine the significance of human qualities and the natural world in matters that are considered spiritual. For Meghan, “College is where I started to pay more attention to spirituality vs. religion and I found myself examining patterns in nature and the interconnectedness of all living things.” Jim started a second major in anthropology and began to consider natural explanations for why humans began to create religions:

Through this coursework and a considerably more progressive cohort I learned how the advent of ‘ceremonial practices (read: religion)’ came about when humankind settled down and began farming. Of course farmers depend on climate and weather for their livelihood, so it is logical to assume they began praying to celestial bodies and weather patterns in attempts to harness favorable crop conditions. To me, this is a clear indication of when we became ‘religious’ as a species.

Dave wrote:

I lost my faith in college when I was exposed to enough natural science to refute the idea of special creation. The facts of evolution are so compelling that I had to accept that biblical creation was wrong. By extension, I then doubted the dogma of messianic salvation . . . and the idea of the biblical god as well.

Not all participants moved straight from religious views into atheism or agnosticism. Others at first thought it might be that the religion they were raised with did not make sense rather than that the entire idea of a supernatural realm did not make sense. Two participants report extensive explorations of various religions before finding that atheism was a more viable worldview for them. Kelsey wrote, “Atheism fit me best personally after exploring many options.” Shannon explored a number of religions that included Wiccan and pagan philosophies as well as a variety of non-denominational Christian

churches. She was a member of a Hindu temple for a time. She found that she could not connect to the certainty about belief and religious stories that was required across religions:

In my later teenage years I attended a Hindu temple. I really loved their views on reincarnation and karma, though I could not find a connection to the gods and goddesses and some stories had to really be taken with a grain of salt. Their stories reminded me so closely of Christian Adam and Eve mantras, I could not believe that those stories could even closely be real.

After I left the Hindu lifestyle, I adopted an atheist attitude . . . I realized that I had things I believed in and things I didn't. My belief system never fit into one true category, so I adopted things from all or none of them.

The influence of problematic teachings. Teachings about original sin, the exclusivity of religion, the judgment of a wrathful God, and the existence of an eternal, conscious hellfire were teachings participants found morally repugnant. These teachings contributed to their rejection of religion. Most of the participants who were raised in religious households came from Catholic or evangelical households. At least by their teens, the idea that their religion was supposed to be exclusively correct began to seem unacceptable. For Mary, the religious ideas that caused her to move away from religion were ones about the absolute truth of her religion, the idea of being born in sin, and hell. When she went to college she joined a student Christian organization. She noticed that members of the organization exhibited what she termed an elitism and judgment of those who did not believe in the teachings of their church. Because she found these values repugnant, she left the organization and her church.

Especially abhorrent to participants was the idea of suffering eternally in a literal hell. As children, ideas about sin and hellfire brought consternation and fear. Kelsey wrote, "I grew up in a relatively religious family. We went to church every Sunday. This wasn't a very good thing for me. Because of our religion I felt like I was a bad person." April writes,

(For awhile I believed) what my church told me: gay people are sinful and they choose to disobey God's word by being gay; premarital sex will guarantee you a spot in eternal fire and damnation; abortion is sinful and women shouldn't put themselves in those 'situations' in the first place; the Bible is literal and every story has really taken place; Satan is constantly trying to tempt me and pull me away from God, etc. In a nutshell, sin was everywhere. I lived in constant fear of (Jesus) coming and I wouldn't have time to 'repent my sins.' The idea of suffering eternally in hell was everywhere.

As some participants grew older, their church's focus on original sin, hellfire, and the exclusive

rightness of their religion were particularly repugnant. Shannon spoke of being affected by doctrines that she felt were in sharp contrast to those she wanted to adopt for her life: “My experience with religion really affected me because I realized that so many people believe that their religion is the correct one and condemn the rest. I don’t believe that is fair, because I just do not know nor will I ever.”

Dave reports he grew up being taught that the earth was only 6,000 years old and that “belief in the divinity of Jesus was mandatory or I would be damned to hell.” When he left home and entered college he “eventually found the idea of hell so ethnocentric, xenophobic, and morally repugnant that (he) rejected the idea of the biblical god as well.”

The influence of civil rights issues. Although their primary reasons for abandoning religion had to do with (as Ashley wrote) “(religion) making absolutely no sense,” religious positions on civil rights, women’s rights, and GLBT issues also featured in participants’ adoption of naturalistic worldviews. Many noted that discrimination against women and GLBT persons and religion’s negative effects on human rights, the environment, and benefits for the poor were factors in their negative evaluation of religion. Sarah wrote, “I left Catholicism because of the archaic beliefs/actions about/toward women and people who are gay.” Dave notes, “Political topics such as the separation of church and state, women’s access to birth control, gay marriage, and fundamentalist zealotry evoked my criticism of religion.”

The issue of civil rights for GLBT people was central for some of the participants who felt that justice and compassion should override ancient and outdated religious dogmas. Stephanie related, “My aunt began to challenge her belief when her son came out as gay; she could not bear the fact that her son and the acceptance she had for him were not considered appropriate and ‘right’ in the Church.” Amy wrote that her mother was excommunicated from her church because she was a lesbian. Brittany, who came out to her family as an atheist, wrote, “I also came out as being gay, and I feel like that had a lot to do with my beliefs as well. I don’t want to accept a religion or a belief that will not or cannot accept me for who I am.” April began to evaluate Christian evangelism and what she saw as the marginalization of entire groups of people and cultures:

As I grew older, I began to see the lowered opinions toward people who did not identify as

Christian or those who identified as gay/lesbian/queer/bi or those who identified as transgender or gender neutral. Also, I started to read books and literature about Christian missionaries coming to other countries and tribes, crushing their sacred traditions, languages, etc. and introducing the concept of sin into their lives. It was around the late teen years that I began seeking answers to these questions and ultimately science, evidence, and atheism felt more right to me.

Other influences on development. Two participants reported it was a traumatic or abusive incident that was the final catalyst for their rejection of religion, bringing out their feeling that religion no longer seemed plausible. (Their pseudonyms are not given for the sake of their privacy). One woman had a traumatic experience in high school that caused her to critically examine the belief system in which she was raised. The religious framework that purported to explain existential issues did not make sense to her. She came to realize she could come to her own conclusions and think for herself rather than simply accepting her parents' belief system.

Another woman related that she was abused at the age of seven and felt she had to 'confess' what happened as though she had been the one who did something wrong. As she grew older she felt betrayed by the religion that she felt had caused her to put blame on herself rather than on the abuser. She had already been questioning Catholicism:

Then, when I was 7 years old I was abused by a community member, obviously this had a pivotal role in how I viewed religion. I tried to plunge further into Catholicism during Sunday school prior to communion, thinking that I could still go to heaven. When it came time to 'confess our sins' I felt very guilty and did not think God would forgive me for what happened. As a child I was very confused as to why God would let something so horrible happen. What kind of life lesson was I supposed to learn from being abused? And even worse I thought that I had sinned and was at fault for this crime. So I ended up feeling very guilty, ashamed, and betrayed by my religion. I stopped believing in God, angels, etc.

Positive aspects of a religious upbringing. The few participants who were raised in relatively liberal Christian denominations reported they experienced the freedom within their families to have discussions about religion that allowed for doubt and the investigation of alternate worldviews. For instance, Meghan wrote that as an adolescent she was very much interested in the paranormal. "This was not discouraged but I was (also) prompted to think critically about why people believe in spirits, ghosts, the paranormal, etc."

Some participants reported on features of their religious upbringing that they thought had been

positive. Shannon noted that religions can be good socialization tools for teaching a common set of values. Mike wrote that religion can be healthy because it “helps some people to frame their spirituality.” Meghan was taught that “Jesus was all around her” and felt as a young child that she was protected, envisioning “Jesus circling all around her like a hula hoop.” Dave expressed that believing in God gave him comfort and the feeling that someone larger was looking out for him. Mary’s worldview features the Golden Rule, the idea of ‘loving your neighbor as yourself,’ a concept she first learned in the religious setting in which she grew up. Jim thought a progressive church can provide a “wholesome community” for raising a family. He noted that church youth groups provided friendships he enjoyed outside of school. Heather writes:

I grew up with a religious father and a nonreligious mother. I always attended church with my father growing up, and I am very grateful for the values and lessons I learned through this aspect of my upbringing . . . I still recognize the important part that it played in making me who I am today.

The lifting of a distorting filter. Despite the reflections of some participants that they appreciated aspects of their religious upbringing, most expressed that they were content to have left behind certain limiting aspects of religion, most especially the idea that they needed to suppress their assessments of reality in order to maintain religious belief. Several mentioned the sense of lifting a filter through which they had always had to view and evaluate the world and becoming free to evaluate the world as it is rather than through the eyes of their religious worldview. Anne noted that when she was religious she had to filter everything through the worldview of her religious culture rather than think for herself:

I felt I couldn’t just read something, or think about something, or consider some kind of social issue, without looking through that lens and then going through these weird mental contortions to conform my thinking and my reactions towards ‘faith’ no matter what seemed really right or true to me. And I see now how distorted that lens was. It’s incredibly freeing to let go of all that.

Laura described it as “dropping the pretense.” Leslie describes a broadening of the elements of curiosity and wonder about her world. Stephanie opined that “religion puts the mind in a box that spirituality does not,” writing that if she were religious she would have to filter her views through those of her church rather than through the ideas that make the most sense to her. The words ‘close-minded’ or the idea of ‘putting one’s mind in a box’ came up frequently to describe participants’ sense that religious faith

required a certain suspension of their assessments of reality. Hannah thought that when she followed a religion it caused her to follow guidelines that actually went against her moral sense and that faith had required her to repress her own evaluations of truth and morality that she thought made more sense.

Some mentioned positive changes they have experienced since acknowledging or becoming atheists. Some described being able to open up to others more freely. Brittany relates that she has become better able to accept people and to understand them more readily. Stephanie found that atheism expanded her empathy for others as a social worker:

I think (leaving religion) has helped me as a social worker since I can see a gay couple on the street and not question what is wrong with them or what religion they are defying but instead think to myself how great it is that two individuals can share something so unique. If I was still very religious I would be following every Catholic rule in the book, and instead of accepting the diversity I see around me every day, I would be stressed about why they are defying what the Bible says or what I was raised to believe.

Personal reliance on reason. The idea of a religious worldview as a lens that distorted perceptions about the world and the way it worked seemed to stem from the importance these participants placed on reason over unquestioned religious faith. One of the most prominent characteristics of the participants was their reliance on reason and their desire to understand the world. Sixteen participants either expressly discussed their preference for using reason or the content of their responses demonstrated their use of critical thinking to evaluate their world. Beginning in their childhood, participants noticed discrepancies between their observations of the world and the religious teachings that purported to explain them. They overwhelmingly cited thought processes rather than emotional processes as the impetus for abandoning religion and other supernatural perspectives and for adopting a naturalistic worldview.

Participants often mentioned a preference for thinking based on evidence. Their preference for reason was evidenced in many of their comments. Jessica wrote that she “typically thinks there is a logical and scientific reason behind things” and appreciates that a naturalist worldview allows her to use evidence to modify her beliefs. Meghan wrote, “It would seem useful for people to ponder different ideas as far as how factual, or how useful, or how enriching they are.”

Critical thinking was a tool participants used to critique their religious upbringing and explore

alternative ideas and responses to their world. Meghan started reading books written by people she thought would have provocative ideas, including Marcus Aurelius and William Blake. April asked herself, “Why does the Bible indicate that the Earth is only 5,000 years old when scientific evidence proves otherwise?” Ashley wrote that she observed the dissonance between religious teachings and the evidence of science, writing, “Christianity and the bible made zero sense to me.”

Hannah read extensively and began to “realize that spirituality is not fact based.” As she expanded her reading and investigation of other ideas, she acknowledged that she “found it easier to believe in things that have proof and evidence.” Shannon and Laura both noted they “tried hard to believe” but could not make religious beliefs make sense due to their observations of reality.

Many participants discussed their preference for making evaluations based on reason. This preference for critical thinking was the most significant element of participants’ adoption of an atheist worldview. Participants voiced that they valued being able to question and challenge conceptualizations. Heather appreciated that her worldview “leaves open a wide variety of possibilities and allows me to explore various beliefs and consider them equally.” Dave noted that for him, “a universe governed by physical laws, untended by any deity, is congruent with the facts I can observe.” Amy says she “came from a hard sciences background, so it sometimes feels silly to me when religion denies evolution.”

Nonsupernatural perspectives of spirituality. For most participants the concept of a ‘higher power’ holds too close an association with the idea of God or gods to be useful terminology. For instance, Leslie expressed: “I think for most who identify as atheists, (reference to) any kind of ‘higher power’ is religious in the sense of being about the supernatural.” For some it was difficult to relate to spirituality in any way due to the word’s association with religious frameworks. In fact, half the participants found the word ‘spirituality’ to be highly associated with religious and supernatural frameworks and thus not relevant. Others redefined terminology like ‘spirituality’ and ‘transcendence’ for their use. Brittany wrote,

I like the word ‘spirituality’ personally because I can make up my own meaning for it. I think it would be hard to pick another word for the meaning of spirituality.

Ashley referred to the use of terms such as ‘spirituality,’ ‘soul,’ and ‘spirit’ as being useful words

although she did not believe in certain underlying ideas that are often meant by the words:

I can use the term ‘soul’ to mean the core humanity and emotion of a person, because I do not know a different word to explain it. However, I think that once a person dies, their ‘soul’ dies with them.

Views on religion and spirituality. Participants seemed to have a marked tendency to view religion in a negative light while spirituality was regarded more positively. Many of the students reported they were raised in religious households that discouraged questioning about the faith. Noting that religion discourages the use of critical thinking was an often-noted reason for their negative view of religion. Mary felt that she and the rest of her Christian college club were spending too much time judging others who did not believe as they did “and assuming they were on their way to hell.” She removed herself from religion because judging others in this way made no sense and went against her values of compassion.

Some appraisals of religion were mixed. Hannah noted that while a religious upbringing taught her good values it also taught her to “devalue entire categories of people.” Laura acknowledged that religion can provide some people a strength and comfort but observed it can also “create judgment and bigotry.” Kelsey noted that at the same time as providing comfort it can “sometimes cloud judgment, make people predisposed to discriminating against others, and cause unnecessary strife between people who believe different things.”

Since participants lack belief in gods and other supernatural beings and realms, many expressed that religion can best be explained by human proclivities to believe in the supernatural and that the presence of religious beliefs can be explained by biology and culture. As Laura said, “the brain is hardwired for certain foundations that make people tend towards believing in gods and the supernatural.” Anne noted the tendency of people to believe in ghosts when they hear house noises in the night seems related to religious tendencies and seems to her part of “superstitions that remain part of our brains from our early development.”

Jessica “perceive(s) spirituality as a mix of magical thinking and symbolic interaction.” Brittany’s assessment was that religion is “very socially constructed . . . made up by humans” who “now take it for granted that it’s something people just have, a real thing.” Jim referred to religions as “ceremonial

practices” developed by humans who banded together and began to form religions to explain and attempt to control natural phenomena. Mary regards religion as having a strong social element and incentive “to join together with people who believe the same as you, because it is comforting to think that people are of the same philosophy as (you are).”

Ashley considered spirituality a concept that is distinguished from religion and has to do with “a personal relationship and connectedness to whatever ‘higher power’ you believe in, whether that is to God, gods, nature, experiences, people, etc.,” though she added that does not believe in a higher power. Jim classified spirituality as “a distant cousin of religion” in which individuals define what is meaningful to them without any doctrine to follow.

Several participants suggested there could be benefits to examining the commonalities that exist among religious worldviews. They thought dialogue between people of different worldviews could highlight peoples’ common frameworks for ethics and justice. Stephanie wrote, “Religions seem to be so similar and yet so different, but it seems that few focus on the similarities.” Shannon noticed similarities in the stories told about God and gods across religions. For instance, she found the stories of Moses and Krishna to be very similar. She concluded that the commonalities among religious stories show that humans are seeking very similar things in their constructions of religions. Anne wished that religious people could recognize the social and biological influences on their religious beliefs so they could let go of the dogmatism she felt “kills conversations.”

Perspectives on the supernatural. Half of the participants associated the term ‘spirituality’ with religion and wrote that they do not relate to the term, do not consider themselves spiritual, or do not relate to spirituality. For instance, Melanie expressed that she “mainly correlate(s) spirituality with expressing religious beliefs” and finds it hard to relate to ideas about spirituality. Another five participants described themselves as ‘somewhat spiritual’ with the caveat that they do not believe there is a ‘spirit’ and that reality as they see it does not include a supernatural realm. Almost every participant specifically disavowed belief in a god or higher power.

Participants generally stated they did not believe in the supernatural, any kind of transcendent

realm beyond the natural, the idea of ‘fate,’ or life after death. Morgan wrote: “I am very comfortable with the idea that when I die life ends and I cease to exist.” Three participants described themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious,’ identifying with spirituality but not with the idea of gods or a supernatural realm. Laura wrote:

I believe that there is one nature to reality and that is the physical world. I believe that, while there are things we do not know about reality, these things are not essentially unknowable. I believe there is a great mystery in the universe, but that this mystery is part of the physical world, not a metaphysical world.

Shannon wrote of her ideas about the supernatural:

The supernatural just means that science has not found a concrete explanation for it. At one point in time the bubonic plague was seen as a supernatural thing until we proved with science that it was a horrible disease, and it became concrete.

Despite the majority of participants holding a very skeptical view about the supernatural, three participants discussed aspects of their worldview that incorporate enigmatic aspects of reality that could be described as supernatural. Meghan wrote:

I’m still figuring out if I believe in anything supernatural . . . I think the energy of a being can become trapped and randomly manifest . . . it could be more of an extreme human nature or projection of emotions . . . Yet I think this is a very rare occurrence and most of the time these seemingly supernatural experiences can be explained . . . The supernatural terms and rituals we incorporate into our lives help us cope with strange experiences until we understand them better.

Mary was the only participant who referred to the possibility of the existence of some kind of supernatural being. She related her experience of surviving a car accident that completely destroyed the vehicle but left her alive and relatively unscathed. She writes about a supernatural explanation for her survival of a car wreck:

I have had an experience that makes me think that there is something bigger than me and us even after leaving any type of formalized religion or faith. I was in a car wreck 12 years ago and most likely should have died. With the damage to the car, in particular the seat I was sitting in, I should have sustained many more serious injuries. At that time I felt that an angel came and sat on my lap and took most of the blow for me . . . These injuries were so mild compared to the damage that should/could have been I need to believe that there is something bigger. That all being said, I do not believe that the something bigger always intervenes and that prayer can help that. I do not believe that the bigger thing is a micro manager.

Mary wrote that her experience was a catalyst that caused her to take control of the direction of her life. She wrote that she centers her spirituality around the Golden Rule and explains, “I am still on my

journey of discovery about what exactly I believe but I am clear in that if it involves loving your neighbor then it is for me.”

Some participants brought up the idea that they can have a tendency to attribute supernatural causes to things that they nevertheless take to have natural explanations. For instance, Anne wrote of the “feeling that you’d better not say the weather will be good for the picnic because then it could jinx it.” Several participants noted that ideas about luck, fate or ‘everything happens for a reason’ can only be considered true if there is some kind of higher power that intelligently directs life. They therefore reject such ideas because the existence of a god or higher power seems to them quite implausible. In contrast to this viewpoint, Shannon explained that her worldview incorporates the idea that there is a reason for all that happens:

I believe in the red thread theory (kind of like the string theory) that each person you meet is someone you were supposed to meet. The theory goes (although I don’t take it literally) each person you are supposed to meet in your lifetime is connected by a red thread. Though this thread may be tangled and twisted and thrown in different directions, we will always be traced back to the person we were supposed to meet. It’s a sort of fate. So in a sense, I truly believe in fate. Everything that happens, happens for a reason.

Participant frameworks of spirituality. Participants noted the phenomenon of spirituality is hard to define and consists of a personal inner experience that is different for each person. Participants valued the ability to pick and choose worldview pieces that fit their ideas. Anne described a spirituality that is unique to her:

I could take spirituality (as it relates to only me) to mean what is most real and authentic for me, or that brings out the best in me, or that’s the most important to me. That would be something like the stars at night with a campfire or being a part of something I feel is bringing betterment or positivity to the world. If I have what some would call a ‘spiritual’ practice, it is to be positive and appreciative of life.

April hopes people can learn that spirituality applies to atheists despite their lack of a religion:

Spirituality is a concept that is unique to each individual and is subsequently hard for me to define simply. To me, spirituality is the means by which individuals connect with ‘something’ they feel to be greater than themselves (be it supernatural entities, practicing mindfulness, the forces of nature, anything beyond the ‘physical world’, etc.) in order to achieve some connection with said ‘forces.’ I do not believe that spirituality is synonymous with faith, nor religion. One can feel a ‘spiritual’ or powerful connection to the universe or nature without believing in the existence of a divine entity/force.

Participants noted that an important piece of their worldview is that rather than ‘finding’ the purpose of life, one creates one’s own sense of meaning and purpose. Heather wrote, “Rather than trying to find one’s purpose, the pursuit of a meaningful life is ultimately spirituality in action.” Leslie observed that religious people seem to need to have some kind of “worldview that outlines a ‘purpose of life’.”

Anne expressed the sentiments of five other participants when she remarked:

The religious sometimes ask how can we nonbelievers have purpose or meaning without God, but I want to suggest that is backwards. The point is to live life in such a way that it *has* meaning and purpose. It’s up to you.

The most common conceptualization of spirituality that participants articulated had to do with some kind of connection. The idea of connection to God had been a part of the students’ thinking both for those who were raised in a religious environment and those who had been exposed to religious ideas from the larger community. As students moved away from the idea of connection with a god they realized they did not believe in, they often came into ideas about other kinds of connections. Nine participants discussed spirituality as some kind of connection or sense of something bigger or larger than one’s own sphere. Eleven described spirituality within a framework of naturalism that was described by Meghan as “a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all living things and feeling most spiritual when immersed in nature.” Meghan also wrote that what is often thought of as the spirit of a living being is the “electrical energy that consists of the impulses that make your heart and brain work.”

The idea of this larger connection did not contain belief in any kind of divine force. Other examples of frameworks of connection included feeling a part of the universe, having a sense of one’s larger connection through human ancestry, or being a part of some kind of service group. Participants acknowledged wonder and awe as important parts of their experience of spirituality. Mike noted that “spiritual feelings for me often present themselves as awe or wonderment.” Participants described certain experiences in which a sense of wonder found its way into their awareness in a way that could be described as transcendent. Brittany describes such experiences of transcendence:

I could describe some of my more spiritual experiences as almost magical; as if it takes my breath away. I don’t seem to have them too often, but when I do, I become very emotional. The moment

makes me happy and full of joy. So my ideas about spirituality seem almost fantasy-like, but I think that is an appropriate view for me and how I connect to things.

Heather spoke of a sense of something larger than herself:

I think of spirituality as a view of the world and universe that goes beyond oneself. It encompasses how you view the broader environment around you, your impact, your purpose, etc. . . . spirituality guides a person's interactions and how he or she chooses to walk through the world.

Participants report they are comfortable with uncertainty and do not feel the need to construct answers for the hardships and difficulties of life. Stephanie lamented that “most people want to have certainty rather than seeking understanding.” Participants reported they hold the same sense of mystery that believers do but attribute the qualities of the numinous to the natural world.

Shannon described spirituality as being about the intangible:

Spirituality can be framed in terms of things that can't be empirically proven—things that are not readily tangible—things that are mysterious. Spirituality as the intangible frames it in terms that don't include the supernatural element and yet speaks to the idea of things we strive for, yearn for, that are higher than ordinary, you could say . . .

Some participants described their perspective of spirituality as a very personal matter and considered the construction of individual forms of spirituality more beneficial than following specific tenets and behaviors. Meghan differentiated religious and spiritual dogmas from the inner experience of them. She described spirituality as “the inner feelings of a religious experience.” For Morgan it was a private experience that “helps people deal with realities of life that can be difficult to understand or handle.” Heather wrote,

I feel that I have a relationship with and connection to the universe that is mine and mine alone. I think all people have this type of connection, which perhaps might stem from similar beliefs and backgrounds, but which is ultimately unique to that person.

Some participants described spirituality as a set of experiences rather than an established philosophy or way of living. Ashley related to spirituality in terms of incidents “that could be considered spiritual” and that help her to feel grounded in some way. She described watching a campfire as an example of a kind of spiritual experience. Participants mentioned music as an important avenue for transcendent moments. Ashley described her sense of spiritual connection at concerts where she can feel

the music in her chest up close to the stage, watch the musicians making music, and enjoy the company of a crowd of other energized people in a primal encounter with music. Brittany described an especially transcendent moment that occurred when she attended an astronomy viewing:

There are times where I have moments, such as going for a hike or a bike ride, and connecting with things around me. The other night I went to an astronomy look out where I got to see some very cool stars and learn new things. That to me was a spiritual moment. I was completely enthralled in what I was doing, and it was almost as if it connected me to what I was looking at. It was a beautiful night and I got to see amazing things. So I feel as though I have moments rather than just being spiritual.

Many participants spoke about a connection to nature being very important to their idea of spirituality. Some participants described their experience of a sense of spirituality as most powerful when they sought solitude in nature:

I do not necessarily identify myself as ‘spiritual’ in that I do not believe in the supernatural, nor do I believe in a ‘meaning of life.’ However, sometimes I do feel a sense of profound ‘spiritual’ connection when in certain places and situations. For example, when I go hiking and I sit atop a mountain overlooking a vast forest in complete silence, I do feel a sense of spirituality. Not spiritual in the sense that I am connecting to a supernatural force; rather, I feel a sense of profound humility when completely alone among nature. (April)

I feel more connected to everything around me when I am outdoors and somewhat alone. I like to say my church is the outdoors. This is where I see beautiful landscapes and creatures undisturbed by those who have yet to find a connection with nature. The outdoors has given me many symbolic lessons I can apply to my non-spiritual world. I have tried to get others to join me when I go into the wilderness but do not always share my belief system with them. I think spirituality is more powerful when you can find it on your own. (Meghan)

I find that I am able to have a sense of a greater spirit, especially when I go to the mountains and smell the smells and feel the breeze and sit on the unmanicured ground. These things I find ground me and give me a sense of what going to church used to be when I was little. I find this much closer to the ‘bigger thing’ than going to a building built by humans to worship the ‘bigger thing.’ (Mary)

Meghan wrote that her spirituality is exemplified by a quotation from William Blake that speaks of the spirituality of a profound connection with nature. She quoted the poem she felt exemplified her views:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour (“Auguries of Innocence,” 1-4)

Mary identifies herself as a “Christian atheist.” She uses this identifier because she has adopted what she considers the most important idea from Christianity—the Golden Rule or the idea of loving others—as the primary foundation for her worldview. She described the way this philosophy guides her life and, as she believes, makes her a better social worker:

I found that I really did like the teachings of Jesus that said ‘love your neighbor.’ Sometimes this is hard for me but I strive to do that always. I guess that is part of why I am able to do the work of social work. I see that each person has something worth loving in them. I consider myself a Christian atheist because I mostly believe in that one teaching of Jesus and the rest I am not concerned with . . . I am still on my journey of discovery about what exactly I believe but I am clear in that if it involves loving your neighbor, then it is for me.

Six other participants mentioned the importance of compassion or love as a guide to living. As Anne said, “When you’re thinking about ethics or morality, the best question to ask is what would love require?” Three participants mentioned that though love is an abstract and immeasurable thing, people believe it exists and find it an important guiding aspect of life.

Shannon discussed a broader concept of beliefs and their significance in human lives. She noted the importance that beliefs of various kinds have in good social work practice:

Even if the belief is just that tomorrow will be a better day, this is a belief system. You do not know that tomorrow will be better, but you believe in it. In our profession, there are modalities of therapy that help clients look at belief systems that are helpful and harmful, like the belief that personal change is possible. I think we have to consider the effects of various religious and supernatural beliefs that tend towards health or not.

Participants wrote of evolving their own sense of what it means to live a good life. Brooke writes of the worldview that informs her thoughts and the way she relates to the world:

I believe in positivity, introspection, taking time to enjoy simple things that are healing for me—like listening to instrumental music, being outdoors and watching a squirrel play, feeling the sun on my skin, and smelling the flowers. I have lived my life following my own moral compass since (leaving the church), doing good for others, doing no harm, being kind and compassionate to myself and others. I try to live my life in a way that is positive, healing, and supportive, and I believe in things like empowerment and treating people and animals with kindness and compassion.

Participants’ views do not fit any prescribed parameters and vary among individuals. This set of students acknowledged that conceptualizations of spirituality are difficult to define. Several of the

students noted that many phenomena exist that people reasonably believe in but which cannot be directly observed, such as love and honesty. Their view was that it is not necessary to bring in beliefs about the supernatural to explain that which we cannot readily explain or that is considered mysterious or intangible in some way.

Challenges in interactions with believers. Nineteen participants related that they had experienced difficulties in interactions with believers due to their atheist worldview. Every case involved interactions with persons who identified as Christians. The high percentage of students who mentioned experiences of this kind seemed remarkable given there had not been a question in the interview addressing anything of the kind. Most participants discussed issues that centered around a clash between their atheist worldviews and the religious beliefs of others, especially when the believers held conservative or fundamentalist beliefs.

Amy observed that, “Overall, my experience of religion has been with people who were extremely nice but often slightly close-minded.” For some there was a fundamental divide inherent in their conscious reliance on reason and the religious person’s dependence upon faith. Jessica described faith as “the purposeful suspension of critical thinking.” It seemed to participants that it could be difficult to break through this difference to have meaningful dialogue. Anne observed that some believers’ insistence that their worldview was exclusively true could close down dialogue entirely, “since they seem stuck on viewing what you have to say through the lens of we are right and you need my religion to save your soul.”

Many participants observed that discussion of scientific theories and certain social ideas seemed to be threatening for religious people. Atheist students reported they can find it difficult to understand how people would eschew widely accepted scientific principles in favor of faith in religious views that contradict them. Amy wrote about her feelings about students who deny evolution not because of evidence but because of their religious beliefs:

I come from a hard sciences background so it sometimes feels silly to me when religion denies evolution (I’m not saying all religious people deny evolution by any means) . . . just saying there are not (any) hard facts backing up (the ideas presented by) religion in my opinion.

A number of participants described feeling some frustration about their interactions with religious people who believe theirs is the only valid worldview. Melanie had the experience of a classmate announcing in class that “in a perfect world, our lord and savior would be accepted by everyone.” The class remained silent, seemingly in order to show respect for his beliefs, yet Melanie heard from classmates later that there was some frustration experienced by classmates. She thought the educator had been clearly uncomfortable and failed to use that teaching moment towards a productive end. A higher level of frustration about religious exclusivity was voiced by some participants than others. As Shannon explained:

I’m open to discussion but my main challenge being agnostic/atheist has been connecting with others who are so set in their ways they won’t allow the difference between our viewpoints to dissipate . . . they seem more concerned with their viewpoints than understanding mine or others.

Experiences with conversion attempts caused exasperation for a number of participants. Leslie, an atheist Jewish student, revealed she had a number of religious people tell her that her beliefs were wrong or that she was going to hell. This caused considerable frustration and she considered the attempts “immature and not very effective ways to create dialogue.” Several other participants voiced their frustration with family, friends, and acquaintances who attempted to convert them to Christianity.

Ashley reports she was shunned by some of her friends when she expressed an interest in evolution as a child. Family members attempted to get her to align herself more with religion, expressing—as Ashley described it—“fear for her eternal soul.” Laura reported that her mother became verbally and emotionally abusive when she expressed doubts as a teen and desperately tried to force her to return to acceptance of religion. Stephanie was rejected by her family when it became known that she was no longer religious. April’s two uncles are pastors of Pentecostal churches and her family is quite religious. She wrote she has revealed “small increments of information” about her worldview, including her support of LGBT rights and her position as pro-choice. She relates that even these small bits of information have resulted in “some significant rifts and arguments” with her extended family.

Some described barriers to communication that arose when family members believed their doubts

and rejection of religious beliefs meant they were on their way to a literal hell. Pronouncements about hellfire felt rejecting because it meant that others thought there was something so wrong with those who did not uphold religious beliefs that they deserved eternal torment. At the same time, there was the feeling that beliefs of this kind were ridiculous and ignorant. There was frustration that it was often not possible to engage in useful discussions with believers of this kind.

Jessica notes “it is not very safe to identify as an atheist, as many religions have deemed that they are the moral group and that atheists are not moral people.” She noted she felt this attitude is “harmful and offensive” and makes it difficult to relate to people who feel this way. Both Jim and Amy expressed that they find it difficult to create close relationships with people who are very religious due to their different worldviews. Ashley reports that her atheism “just confuses people and can cause judgment.” She wrote that some of her friends “cannot comprehend that I simply do not believe in their god.” She finds it frustrating that some who tell her they are praying for her to get into heaven make the assumption that theirs is the only valid worldview to have. Anne said, “it just slams the door on any kind of dialogue.”

Several students mentioned that their social work department seemed to consist primarily of evangelical Christian students. Shannon said “My atheism has definitely posed challenges for me because at (this university) it is really common for people to be of the Christian faith, and I feel ostracized because I don’t believe in God.” In contrast, Ashley said she is completely open with others in the social work department even though she finds it “hard to connect with peers because so many are Christian and find it horrific that I do not believe in God.” She says they exhibit astonishment that a “kind, caring woman” would not be a Christian, reflecting what Ashley considers their apparent association of atheism with some kind of moral deficit.

Morgan said the major challenge to her in social work classes is the assumption that she is a Christian or has some kind of religious worldview. Participants mentioned they often experience a dilemma when assumptions are made that they are religious. At such times the nonreligious person must either make some kind of declaration that he/she does not hold a religious worldview or remain silent and allow the assumption to remain. Neither position is comfortable for them. If they speak up, they often find

the religious person is somehow feeling attacked, but if they remain silent they are complicit in the assumption that they are religious. Laura noted if she is silent she also feels that opportunities to normalize the fact of the existence of atheists are lost.

None of the participants reported being completely closeted, though many described being selective about who they are open with due to stereotypes, assumptions, and their wish to not offend believers. Participants reported they are selective about who they talk to about their worldview even among their family and friends due to experiences of being judged for not having religious beliefs. Brittany wrote, “admitting (your atheism) to people is a huge challenge and friendships could be lost over it.” Heather wrote that she has still not told her father that she is an atheist and has allowed him to assume she still identifies as a Christian because she does not feel “ready for that conversation yet.” Melanie reported that she is cautious about discussing religious views with those in her residence hall because her views are different from that of most of the other residents.

Participants discussed that when they speak up in awkward situations with believers, they feel they are sometimes “met with a sense of adversity,” notes Shannon. She feels this is due to believers thinking atheists “must be bad, ‘godless’ kinds of people.” Due to reactions they have received when they reveal their nontheist viewpoints, many participants revealed they tend to avoid certain topics in order to maintain peace. Mary said she is not very open to sharing her worldview with others because she thinks believers will not be capable of conducting a conversation but will “try to convert me to what they believe.” Dave noted that his atheism seems to challenge religious people because they can be offended when certain topics come up in conversations. Anne thought religious students may feel challenged due to doubts that can arise for them when others discuss their nonreligious or atheist views. She also noted that believing students seemed to her to think that—more than simply having another opinion—she was “rebellious against God.” She ventured this must be due to their assumption that their religion is exclusively ‘right’ and their need to defend themselves against any doubts they might be having.

Several participants described problems in their fieldwork placements concerning conflict between staff members’ religion and the participant’s atheism. Laura noted a number of staff at the

hospice where she worked expressed “feeling bad for atheists” because “they have a harder time with death.” Meghan wrote about her field placement at an agency that used literature that read “anyone who does not believe in God has a poverty of spirituality” and that “it is the helper’s duty to decrease that poverty.” Meghan reported she felt there was an assumption on the part of the workers that everyone at the agency agreed with these ideas and that those who did not, including her, were devalued by the agency. She reported feeling angry about the evangelistic ideas upheld by the agency because she felt they were diametrically opposed to the social work values and ethics of self-determination and empowerment she was being taught in her classes. She noted that a primary goal of social work is to empower clients to utilize their own strengths rather than imposing one’s own worldviews upon them. She felt that the workers at her agency pressured clients to accept a Christian worldview and conveyed an attitude that they believed they were better than nonbelieving colleagues and clients.

A particular phenomenon stood out as common in participant experiences of interactions with believers. Many participants noted a tendency for believers to appear to take offense or to feel threatened when the subject of nonbelief was brought up. Eight participants felt there was an unspoken taboo against mentioning nonreligious or nonsupernatural perspectives within discussions about religion and spirituality, as though to do so was to somehow challenge religious beliefs.

A good example of this phenomenon was brought up by Laura. She was addressing an issue other participants had brought up about receiving negative feedback when they brought up the subject of atheism or agnosticism within the context of content on spirituality. Laura thought she should speak up when an assignment contained the assumption that all the students would hold some kind of religious or spiritual belief system. She said that although she spoke in what she thought was a brief and matter-of-fact manner, some students expressed that they were offended or hurt by her simply mentioning that not everybody in the class held religious beliefs: “It seemed to me I got the same reaction as though I had actually said, ‘None of your religious beliefs are real’, though I was just pointing out that not everyone had them.” Anne noted the reason for this kind of interaction is that expressing atheist viewpoints does point out that you think religious viewpoints are false, even if indirectly.

Some participants spoke of finding it hard not to judge believers. Meghan wrote, “Sometimes I catch myself thinking of my worldview in an elitist way and realize that each has to be respected.” Some of the students noted that atheist and religious worldviews can present very different appraisals of social justice matters. Shannon spoke of the way religious beliefs have negatively affected GLBT and women’s rights. She admits these issues have caused her to “adopt strong attitudes towards people who ostracize others due to their belief systems.” April described her attempts to try to understand the concerns of religious people:

Although I feel at times that I hold some bitterness and judgment toward the Christian faith, I do recognize where that comes from. I also recognize that not every denomination, or even every individual who identifies as Christian, acts in the hateful, ignorant manner that I encountered in my own experience. However, I am sometimes grateful for that experience. Because I have truly experienced having (a Christian) identity, I am able to understand where a lot of Christians’ behaviors and mindsets come from. Though I disagree with it now, I have a profound experience under my belt.

In contrast to reports by some other participants, Hannah reported she had no issues with being an atheist on campus:

In the college atmosphere as a whole, I feel like religion has a bad stigma so I don’t believe that my lack of religion has brought me any challenges. I don’t think that anyone judges me for not being religious. If someone asks about my views or it comes up in conversation, I’m happy to share my views.

Along with the frustrations they voiced, participants also expressed concern for believers who can sometimes feel offended or attacked. Many of them expressed their wish to avoid causing believers undue discomfort. They realized they can create negative feelings for religious others by what they say and do. Dave wrote that he is very aware of the need to speak carefully in order not to offend believers. Hannah wrote, “just because I don’t believe doesn’t mean I don’t think they should.”

At the same time, participants also expressed, as Anne wrote, “it doesn’t do them any good to allow them to think that theirs is the only real worldview . . . they have to learn to respect other viewpoints in practice.” Some brought up a conflict between wanting to avoid hurting or offending believers but at the same time thinking an academic environment should not allow some topics to be

considered taboo.

Participants noted that Christianity seemed to be considered the norm in classes and they want to have atheism and other nonreligious viewpoints acknowledged in class. Participants want to normalize conversations about nontheistic worldviews and provide exposure for believers and nonbelievers to others' worldviews. Shannon pointed out that exposure to atheist worldviews might eventually result in atheism no longer presenting "a hindering factor in whether I am (perceived as a) good person or not, worthy of friendship or not, or moral or not." Meghan wrote that she felt "the more people become exposed (to naturalist views), the more they will understand."

Participants perceived that interactions between students who hold different worldviews can be fraught with discomfort, fear, and the potential for emotional reactivity or defensiveness. Many topics seemed to cause discomfort within curriculum content on spirituality. Some of the participants theorized that sensitivity and discomfort around the subject may cause both educators and students to exercise caution when discussing religion and spirituality and to limit discussion topics. Jessica indicated she has noticed that many students—both believers and atheists—"don't feel safe talking about (their worldviews) or offering a perspective in class."

Participants report getting mixed reactions when they identify as atheist. Laura reported that she has expressed in classes that she would like to have nontheist worldviews acknowledged. She said some people were offended but others opened up and came out as also nonreligious. Participants noted several issues they thought can contribute to poor communication between conservative religious individuals and atheists. One of them was that believers can see atheists as immoral. Shannon noted that American society is socialized to see atheists as less moral than believers. She thought it must be confusing for believers to understand how many of the people they interact with are nice and reasonable people yet do not believe because their churches teach that nonbelievers are immoral people or are 'rebellious against God.' Some participants reported that in their experience, believers can be astonished or bewildered when they realize there are people who do not believe in their religious doctrines.

The most common concern about class discussions was that religious students seemed to react to

content about nonreligious viewpoints by feeling victimized or attacked. For Amy it is inherently difficult to attempt effective discussions in class about worldviews when a subset of students are “closed to the idea” that worldviews other than theirs can have validity. From the experience of the atheist students, emotional reactivity could result even when it seemed to them that the discussion was neutral and did not seem to be directly challenging to religious beliefs.

Participants reported the experience that just the mention of atheism in the context of a discussion about religion and spirituality seemed to provoke defensive or hurt feelings and a sense that it was considered rude for the speaker to bring up their worldview. Shannon wrote:

When I’ve brought up naturalism in various classes, I felt like I got kind of a push-back as though it had been slightly rude or something to even say that, as though it implied somehow that other people in the class must be wrong . . . In my life, talk of religion is kind of a taboo subject, at least of my (views).

April wrote, “I feel that many Christian students feel personally victimized by my denial of their god. To me, atheism feels like a taboo subject.” She did not understand why this was so because “in reality, they are the dominant identity in this country.” Laura wrote:

Other students were kind of offended by my putting stuff out there in the classroom . . . they started getting defensive and feeling attacked simply by my saying here’s what I believe . . . that was perceived as threatening.

Some of the participants made inferences from their experiences with some believers in order to attempt to understand them. Ashley expressed that believers may find it difficult to understand atheist perspectives because there is a cognitive dissonance between their perception of a person as nice and their belief that people who do not believe in God are immoral or somehow rebelling against God. Similarly, Anne noted that it is obvious that saying you do not have religious or supernatural beliefs inherently implies at the very least that you would consider the religious person’s beliefs untrue. She noted the atmosphere is that one is supposed to accept religious views without question. Some wondered if bringing up atheism might be uncomfortable because it may activate doubts believers do not want to think about.

Kelsey notes there is also an “underlying distrust that religionists seem to have in atheists, even in our profession.” She wrote about an experience she had in one social work class after a discussion about

spirituality in which she came out as an atheist:

I am normally not very open with others about my atheism because of the negative connotation still associated with it. I have had bad experiences with disclosing my atheism as well. For example, (after) a social work class I had a classmate tell me that I couldn't ever be a good social worker because I didn't believe in God . . . After the shock, I just felt hurt and a little sad that someone going into a career that will interact with and advocate for all sorts of people, including atheists (could think like that) . . . Most people think that those going into helping professions, especially social work, are tolerant and open-minded to other belief systems. However, underneath the surface, there is still a prevailing prejudice towards any non-Christian individual.

Kelsey wrote, "I think the more atheists come out, the more people will have to realize there's something wrong with the idea that only Christians (and whoever else thinks their religion is the only one) can be good and caring." An example that illustrates the above issues was given by Anne. She related that at the end of one class period an assignment was discussed in which the students were to "investigate a faith community different from theirs." One of the atheist students came out to the class and let the professor know that the wording of the assignment did not apply to everyone. A number of students were upset by the student's declaration and went to the professor after class, feeling offended that the student spoke up. The two known atheists in the class told Anne they felt the matter could have been handled easily when it first came up if the professor had been more aware of the heightened emotions in the class and been able to respond appropriately.

Several participants noted that educators seem uncomfortable with the subjects of religion and spirituality. Participants talked about incidents in which educators seemed to demonstrate discomfort with the subject of atheism in particular. Leslie wrote, "I believe professors are probably uncomfortable with the idea of atheism or have no idea how to talk about it." Students thought that educators' discomfort seems to come out in a reluctance to address certain issues and in difficulty managing disputes and uncomfortable conversations in class. A few of the students also expressed that they thought educators sometimes miss opportunities to ask questions and make comments that would be informative due to their own discomfort.

Inclusion and dialogue. Participants expressed concerns that nontheist and nonsupernatural worldviews were not included. They thought critical thinking about worldviews is restricted by the

sensitivity of believers and the resulting discomfort of their educators about atheism and other nonreligious frameworks.

Recommendations for inclusion. Participants voiced their desire that atheism and other nontheist worldviews should be included in curriculum content on religion and spirituality. Participants noted that discussion of religion often centers around Christianity since it is the most common religion in the United States. However, Shannon noted that around the world the percentage of people holding nontheist worldviews is growing and that a greater variety of spiritualities are appearing in the United States. Participants felt these facts indicate that curriculum content should reflect this reality by normalizing discussion of worldviews other than Christian. Jessica reflected that the curriculum should provide a setting in which atheists and others can feel “equally comfortable and invited to speak our thoughts.” Several participants noted their experience was that atheism was not brought up unless by them. Laura added that nontheist perspectives should be included “whether a student is there to advocate for it or not.”

The students noted that the word ‘atheist’ identifies people by what they do not believe and gives no information about the nature of their worldview. Leslie pointed out that those who identify as atheist hold differing ideas though they all lack belief in gods and supernatural phenomena. The word ‘atheism’ can also be associated with some stigma. Brooke noted that many people do not seem to understand what it means and can have a fearful or negative view of atheists. A third of the participants preferred the term ‘naturalist’ and used it extensively in their responses. Some noted the reason for their preference for the term stemmed from its reference not to what one does not believe but to the idea that reality arises from and can be explained by natural processes.

Kelsey thought that content on spirituality needs to include discussion of alternative worldviews including atheism and agnosticism and should receive as much attention as religious belief systems. Brittany pointed out that it would be helpful for social work students to recognize the presence of a wide spectrum of worldviews, to understand their differences and similarities, and to be familiar enough with them to work with clients of all worldviews. Shannon commented:

I think we should not only be culturally competent but also that social workers learn about other

religions besides their own so that social workers who are entering the field can be sensitive to those beliefs. I feel like having a solid foundation of knowledge about others' beliefs would be extremely beneficial to social workers.

Some participants advocated utilizing a broader conceptualization for the curriculum that would include religious, spiritual, and naturalist worldviews rather than the current focus on just supernatural frameworks. Laura suggested using terminology that is "broad enough to capture where the client is at and not seem to restrict to (any specific set of beliefs)" and that "is also not verbiage that is normally associated with religion or spirituality." Other participants thought social work students need to be able to ask questions and explore their client's ideas about spirituality in a way that does not give the impression that the social worker expects that they should have some kind of religious belief.

Laura expressed that the word 'spirituality' is sometimes considered an inclusive term yet is not inclusive of atheism and other nonsupernatural worldviews. She noted the word also contains certain assumptions:

When people ask about, discuss, or include 'spirituality' in a curriculum or presentation, it presupposes that everyone agrees that there is a spiritual nature to reality. When discussing the topic of 'spirituality' there is, of course, the assumption of there being a spiritual dimension to reality. I think that we need to remove the word 'spirituality' from the curriculum or use it only when we refer to the practice or experience of spiritual (supernatural) belief systems. I think the terms 'worldview' or 'life philosophy' are inclusive of everyone.

Participants thought a term like 'worldview' that covered religious, spiritual, and naturalist perspectives would convey the idea of commonalities in the various ways humans consider things like meaning, awe and wonder, and what it means to live a good and ethical life. Ideas for inclusive language that came up frequently in the interviews were 'philosophy of life' and 'worldview' as umbrella terms that could encompass religions, a wide variety of spiritual perspectives, as well as atheist and other nonreligious worldviews. April noted the need to cover a broad spectrum of worldviews:

Thus far, the only problem about the presentation of spirituality I have seen in my social work classes is that it is not necessarily comprehensively discussed/covered. Because faith, spirituality, or lack thereof (one's personal belief system) is pertinent to the human condition, I think it is important to discuss all aspects of the spectrum. We have talked about different religions, but never individuals who identify as atheist or as primarily spiritual (rather than religious).

Participants noted what seemed to them an overall assumption that spirituality, as Brittany noted,

“represents something real” rather than a human construction. One representation of this assumption is the observation by five participants that their educators spoke of humans as comprising body, mind, and spirit. Others noted their educators talked about spirituality as a universal concern of all humans. Some atheist students reported they were the ones who had to bring up the existence of nontheist and nonsupernatural worldviews. On each of the occasions in which they spoke up, it was because they thought assumptions were being made that needed to be corrected.

A number of participants thought educators should keep their worldviews to themselves and that this was important no matter what type of worldview they held. Jim advised that educators should use care because talking about their own worldviews could inadvertently cause students to feel the educator would not respect their different worldviews. Laura thought that neutrality on the part of educators would also model for their students the social worker’s mandate to approach their clients with impartiality. Brittany expounded upon problems that can ensue when educators talk about their own worldviews in the curriculum:

It is better that they don’t share a lot of their personal beliefs with the class. There have been a few professors who are open with their beliefs or their non beliefs. I think that tends to form a bias in the class and some people might have a hard time overlooking that. Since religion has become such a controversial topic in our society, teaching it very objectively and safely is the healthiest way to teach it, in my opinion.

The need for effective dialogue. In line with themes that have already been discussed concerning difficult interactions with believers and certain taboos, participants discussed the need for students to be challenged to discuss topics that are difficult. Leslie wrote, “I think that being in college, provocative topics and questions that make students feel uncomfortable are the best discussion questions and receive the most participation and opinions.” Several participants noted that the most memorable discussions they have had in various classes have also been the most challenging or difficult. Stephanie suggested that tough topics could be addressed in a manner “similar to how many other sensitive subjects are discussed, like race in a white-male dominated society.” Leslie recalled class discussions that were fraught with emotion yet also productive:

I have participated in racially tense conversations in a few of my classes and it is just important

that when emotions run high and there is conflict to respect one another. When emotions do run high is when peoples' passions come out as well as what they are really thinking. So as long as it is a comfortable and respectful classroom setting, let the topic get heated.

Anne wrote she thought at times discussions in class could contain “a kind of defensiveness and fear that makes it hard to talk about certain things.” A number of participants felt that there were unspoken taboos that made it seem impolite to say anything that could be construed as challenging a religious belief. Several thought the root of this sense of being challenged stemmed from some religious students' idea that their religion is exclusively right, resulting in their discomfort with ideas that may seem to inherently dispute their faith. Anne wrote, “Believers look at you like you don't believe in love or justice, and you want to be able to just talk back and forth, but they have a certainty that kills conversation.” Shannon theorized that religious students may not want to acknowledge atheist and other religious perspectives because it could cause them to doubt that their religion was the ultimate truth. She wrote, “If we acknowledge naturalist perspectives, it means that the other dominant religions could be flawed, and no one wants to think that what they believe in could be flawed.”

Some participants noticed social work students in various classes displaying strengths they felt educators could nurture to bring discussions about worldviews to a new level of dialogic interchange. Brittany pointed out that social workers enjoy analyzing and discussing many things. Jim expressed that debate can be “fun, insightful, and when discussed respectfully, can be a great way to get to know your classmates.” Jessica noted that social workers have qualities that make them “able to do a really good job of advocating and including.”

Heather felt that “establishing a safe, respectful environment is the most helpful thing professors can do when presenting this type of material.” Anne summed up her view of the challenge inherent in working through difficult subjects within the curriculum:

It seems that social work students need to learn to confront their emotions and reactions about (worldview differences) because we have to deal with people from different backgrounds and with a huge diversity of worldviews in our practices. We have to learn how to accomplish the task of moving through our reactivity and that misplaced politeness or fear. If we can't talk about this stuff in class, how can we be effective dealing with clients?

A more professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality. Some participants brought up

the idea that religion and spirituality should be approached from a professional and academic standpoint rather than from a metaphysical one. Jessica pointed out that social workers are mandated to utilize the most recent data and to cite credible sources for practice. Their primary concern was expressed by Mary as a lack of attention to the primary goal of helping social work students “learn to assess what people believe about their world and how they use those beliefs to function in their world.” Laura thought the guiding question in the development of curriculum content on spirituality should be ‘What do students need to learn to help clients in the real world?’”

Some participants wrote about the need for the maintenance of high academic standards with regard to material on religion and spirituality. These participants thought they should be investigating relevant information about religion and spirituality from fields like psychology and anthropology to help students understand how humans come to have religious beliefs.

Others advocated that the purpose of social work content on religion and spirituality should be to prepare social work students to help clients increase functioning and well-being. Their view is that this can best be accomplished by incorporating the latest research from disciplines such as psychology, neurology, sociology, and biology. Jim (who is also an anthropology student) wrote that in contrast to social work approaches, content on religion and spirituality in anthropology classes took a professional approach by investigating spiritual beliefs from the standpoint of human culture. Mary advises that the curriculum should address the kinds of worldviews people have and learn how worldviews can improve or inhibit well-being and functioning in the lives of clients.

Participants thought it was important that the curriculum address both the negative and positive effects of religious and other worldviews on client well-being. They felt that the contribution of religion to the marginalization of populations should be openly addressed, as should the positive influence of religion on clients’ sense of well-being and belonging. Dave voiced that he wished educators “would help us learn to deal with the racist and xenophobic aspects of religion.” Meghan expressed concern that it must be difficult for religious students to hear discussions about “the historical oppression and pain (religions) have caused the disabled, homosexual, female, multicultural, and other groups.” She thought

the curriculum should not ignore these painful aspects of religion but should also examine the way various religions have worked to change oppression and power differentials. She notes there are often discussions about the important role religion had in the early development of the social work profession and thinks the curriculum needs to also address the difficult subject of “how worldviews have oppressed some and created privilege for others, such as the (continuing concept of the) ‘worthy poor.’”

Diversity, cultural competency, and health and well-being were advocated as the most appropriate frameworks for classroom discussion of various worldviews. Participants wanted the curriculum to provide guidelines about how to evaluate spirituality as one of the many components of a client’s life. Participants would like to have religion and spirituality addressed from the standpoint of cultural competency, diversity, and client well-being, and would like to have atheism and other worldviews included in the discussion. Participants regarded the preparation of social work students to work with clients from the standpoint of their well-being and functioning as the most important consideration for the curriculum on spirituality. Mary wrote,

I think that we need to be taught that (religion and spirituality) are important, really important to some of our clients and that if they bring it up or if they are needing help to process it we need to be prepared to do so . . . mostly I think we need to be taught to meet the client where they are and only speak religion with them if they bring it up.

Participants considered it important that social workers learn to maintain a neutrality when they confront issues of religion and spirituality with their clients. Participants pointed out that social workers should not assume that clients are religious or spiritual. They felt that asking about a client’s religious beliefs can inadvertently present an expectation that they should be religious. Laura proposed an example of a neutral question that could be used for assessment: “Do you have a life philosophy that is important to you?” She noted that such questions would avoid conveying personal biases to clients.

Participants noted that since assessing client strengths is important in practice, the strengths of various worldviews should be acknowledged and discussed in the curriculum. Stephanie provided her thoughts about the strengths she thinks atheism and agnosticism bring to social workers. She noted that naturalist worldviews can be “a position of strength in regards to openness to new ideas.” She wrote:

I feel atheism makes me a better social worker because your mind can be truly open to diversity and a variety of ideas. That's a huge consideration as we examine how atheism/agnosticism/etc. can be acknowledged and included within a discourse that is so often framed in religious and supernatural ways.

Summary

The major themes from the data are: (a) developing as atheists against the grain of a religious environment; (b) personal reliance on reason; (c) nonsupernatural perspectives of spirituality; (d) challenges in interactions with believers; (e) inclusion and dialogue; and (f) a more professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality.

Almost all participants were raised in religious homes and began questioning religion at an early age. Participants reported they did not believe in gods or any kind of transcendent realm apart from the natural. Participants formulated their own conceptualizations of spirituality that featured humanist and naturalist frameworks. They noted that rather than ‘finding the meaning’ of life, their sense of spirituality comes from living a life that creates meaning. Important elements of spirituality that were also mentioned included transcendent moments in which they experienced awe and wonder; a sense of the interconnectedness of the natural world; and an ethical foundation of love and service.

Participants spoke of misunderstandings and discomfort in communication between nontheist and religious students in the classroom and the sense that mentioning non religious worldviews can be seen as challenging believers’ religious beliefs. They recommended that the curriculum develop good dialogic techniques to help students work through biases and other issues that can come up within discussions of worldviews. The students wished to have atheism and other nonreligious worldviews included in the curriculum.

Participants felt that the purpose of curriculum content on spirituality should be the training of social work students for competency to respond to issues about spirituality and worldviews in the field. They recommended that curriculum content on spirituality should maintain a focus on improving client functioning and well-being. Participants noted that educators sometimes did not seem well prepared for the particular challenges of content on spirituality and worldviews. They recommended that educators

receive training to increase their knowledge about worldviews; learn to handle their own biases and reactivity; become competent to create affirming and inclusive environments; create assignments that are relevant to client well-being and functioning; and become competent to manage challenging, respectful dialogue in the classroom.

The findings provided rich answers to the research questions. Chapter Five will include comparisons of the findings of this research with the literature, analysis of the themes, and recommendations for curriculum content on spirituality.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the study followed by a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4. The chapter will conclude with implications for theory for curriculum content on spirituality, suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality, and implications for policy on curriculum content on spirituality.

Summary of the Study Problem and Methodology

A review of the literature indicated that curriculum content on spirituality fails to take into account the growing number of people who hold atheist or naturalist worldviews (Pew Research Center, 2015a; WIN-Gallup International, 2012). Almost no information could be found about this population. The research problem was that curriculum content on spirituality in social work education seems to have a primary focus on religious and other supernatural perspectives (Senreich, 2013) despite the reality that an increasing number of people subscribe to atheist worldviews (Cook et al., 2012). If social work students are not receiving information about nonreligious worldviews in curriculum content on spirituality, they will presumably be unprepared to handle existential issues with their atheist and other nonreligious clients. Social work students were chosen as participants for the study because they were the only demographic that could provide information about atheist social work student perspectives on spirituality and observations about curriculum content on spirituality from an atheist perspective. Participants were gleaned from the social work departments of two state universities in the western United States.

A constructivist paradigm was deemed the most useful methodological framework for the purposes of this study due to the constructed nature of spirituality. A constructivist perspective examines realities as socially constructed phenomena that take multiple forms within specific historical and cultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This study concerns atheist social work students, their perspectives and experiences about spirituality, and their thoughts and experiences about curriculum content on spirituality in social work education. Internet interviews were conducted with

twenty-two participants using open-ended questions with the intention of obtaining rich information using methodologies that allow for the emergence and exploration of ideas.

The primary research questions for this study were: (a) What kind of conceptualizations and experiences does a sample of atheist university social work students hold about spirituality and about curriculum content on spirituality?; and (b) How might their experiences and conceptualizations contribute to curriculum content on spirituality? This chapter presents a discussion of the answers to those research questions.

Findings/Major Themes From the Data

The primary goal of this research was not to obtain generalizable results but to explore the experiences and perspectives of a small sample of atheist social work students about their perspectives on spirituality and their experience of curriculum content on spirituality. Participants brought up not only information that had been initially sought but also interesting themes and ideas that were unexpected. The interview questions were purposefully general and open-ended in order to obtain rich data. All participants were asked the same initial set of open-ended questions and provided answers to them. The discussion then continued with further exploration of their ideas and experiences. The original questions can be found in “Appendix B: Participant Questionnaire.”

This study duplicated some of the results of other studies on topics that described participants’ development as atheists, the tendency of atheist individuals to rely on reason and critical thinking, and atheist perspectives and experiences of spirituality that have been explicated in other research. The study gleaned new information about relationships with believers and contributed ideas for curriculum content on spirituality from the students’ unique perspectives as atheists. The major themes from the data are: (a) developing as atheists against the grain of a religious environment; (b) personal reliance on reason; (c) nonsupernatural perspectives of spirituality; (d) challenges in interactions with believers; (e) inclusion and dialogue; and (f) need for a more professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality.

The following provides a brief review and discussion of the conclusions of this study followed by discussions of the study's implications and recommendations for theory, policy, and research with regard to social work curriculum content on spirituality.

Table 3 presents an overview of the major themes that came out of analysis of the data provided by the participants of this study.

Table 3

Major Themes

Developing as atheists against the grain of a religious environment	All but two participants were raised in religious homes. Development as atheists was a personally achieved status for participants (Fiala, 2009) that had to take place against the grain of expected religious beliefs. Development followed a traditional trajectory towards atheism beginning with childhood acceptance of religion, a period of questioning, and then adopting an atheist worldview (LeDrew, 2013).
Personal reliance on reason	Participants have an intellectual orientation (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013) and came to an atheist worldview through reasoning processes (Hwang et al., 2011).
Nonsupernatural perspectives of spirituality	Participants do not believe in the most commonly cited elements of spirituality including belief in supernatural beings and a transcendent realm (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011). Participants create their own conceptualizations of spirituality (Baker & Smith, 2009). Rather than thinking one should 'find the meaning or purpose of life,' participants think of meaning and purpose as arising from the pursuits, interests, and values that they choose (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Participants report a sense of connection as an important element of spirituality (Pew Research Center, 2015), especially a connection with nature (Pew Research Center, 2012). Participants consider compassion and reason important foundations for life (Russell, 1971).
Challenges in interactions with believers	All but three participants brought up difficulties in interactions with believers that include facing negative stereotypes about their character, assumptions that everyone is religious, and taboos against the critical discussion of religion and spirituality. They note a particular sensitivity and defensiveness that believers seem to exhibit when atheist worldviews are discussed; participants think these issues inhibit dialogue and learning in the classroom (Becker, 2009).
Inclusion and dialogue	Participants report that nonreligious and atheist perspectives are not included in the curriculum and recommend that curriculum content on spirituality should be inclusive in content and verbiage, recommending that the curriculum change the word 'spirituality' to 'worldview' (Holloway & Moss, 2010). Participants think effective dialogue about spiritual and other worldviews is inhibited by deference to sensitivities about spirituality and worldviews and that effective techniques should be developed to counter cultural norms that inhibit effective dialogue.
Need for a more professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality	Participants express concerns that curriculum content on spirituality does not seem to be effectively addressing its logical purpose of preparing social work students to handle issues about spirituality and worldviews in practice. They recommend that content on spirituality should provide students with: knowledge about worldviews; specific skills students can use in practice; experiences that will help students address biases and stereotypes; the ability to handle conflicts between worldview beliefs and social work practice values; and preparation to effectively and appropriately address worldview issues with clients who hold worldviews different from theirs.

Developing as atheists against the grain of a religious environment. Twenty of the twenty-two participants in this study were raised in religious homes, all of them Christian except for one student who

was raised in a Jewish home. This aligns with other research that indicates most atheists are raised in religious homes (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Mueller, 2012). The remaining two participants who were not raised in religious homes noted that the surrounding culture provided an expectation or assumption that they should be religious (Smith, 2011). According to an extensive WIN-Gallup poll (2012), American atheists develop within a highly religious culture in which 90% of the population believes in some kind of God or higher power.

Trajectory toward an atheist worldview. This study did not expressly ask for information that would address specific trajectories towards an atheist worldview, but it appears that participants usually followed what has been called a traditional trajectory towards atheism (LeDrew, 2013) in which a person moves from an early childhood acceptance of religion into an extended period of doubt and evaluation of religious beliefs, finally purposefully moving away from religious worldviews and adopting an atheist worldview (Ecklund & Long, 2011; Zuckerman, 2008). Two participants explored a number of other religious worldviews before deciding that atheism best fit their ideas. For two others a traumatic event precipitated their critical evaluation of religious explanations for suffering and trauma, leading to their rejection of what they saw as inadequate and illogical religious accounts.

There was a contrast between the ages of questioning in the Hunsberger and Altemeyer study (2006) and those of this study. The median age for the beginning of a period of questioning for Hunsberger and Altemeyer's American participants was fifteen for the San Francisco sample and eighteen for the samples from Idaho and Alabama. While there was not a specific question about the age when participants began questioning religious beliefs in this study, half of their narratives indicate their questioning began sometime in early childhood or middle school age.

Several participants described realizing they were different during elementary school in that they did not believe in the religious stories that everyone else in their world seemed to espouse. Several participants noted a similarity to the experiences of GLBT people who grow up in heterosexual households and begin to realize they are different at an early age. In both cases there are majority expectations in the culture that the individual discovers are not a fit for them.

Half the participants in this study reported questioning religious stories in early to mid childhood. One participant was only six years old when he realized he did not believe in God and quietly stopped saying the words ‘under God’ during the Pledge of Allegiance at school. As children they noted that religious stories were given what seemed an inexplicable importance that was not ascribed to other stories like those in their storybooks or those about Santa. Three participants noted their consternation when adults eventually endorsed their rejection of Santa while expecting them to continue to believe religious stories that they were finding equally implausible.

Participants’ development as atheists had to occur against the grain of the religious beliefs of their families and communities. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) observe that atheists have to actively choose their own beliefs, in contrast to religious believers who adopt the religious narratives of their families and cultures. The worldview development of study participants fits with Fiala’s description of atheism as an “achieved rather than an ascribed status” (2009, p. 26). Participants described going through a dynamic process of articulating their doubts, distancing themselves from theistic beliefs and then moving into defining their worldview through reflective thought, reading books and articles, and interactions with others. As in Smith’s (2011) study, social contact with others who also held atheist or agnostic worldviews was important in participants’ development from an evaluation of religious beliefs that had been taken for granted into salient and meaningful identities as atheists.

Influences toward the development of an atheist worldview. The major cause for participants moving into questioning and doubt about religious beliefs was their perception of a dissonance between their observations of reality and the religious teachings that were being espoused by their families and communities (Cragun, 2011; Hwang et al., 2011; Smith, 2011). Participants reported rejecting religion in their late teens or early twenties, an age range that is consistent with the results of studies done by LeDrew (2013) and Mueller (2012). Their rejection of religious beliefs began with a period of doubt and evaluation that began in childhood. These were thoughtful children who critically evaluated the religious stories they grew up with. Exposure to academics at school, having friends who held different

worldviews, reading, and activities beyond their church were all significant influences on participant explorations of alternative worldviews.

Most participants reported being believers at one point in their life, even if only when they were children. As did the participants of Smith's (2011) study, participants regard their former belief as arising from socialization to religious belief rather than from their own personal reflection and choice. There were powerful incentives to attempt to believe because nonbelievers were framed in a very negative light while belief in God was considered a virtue. For instance, Laura described going through "mental gymnastics" in order to try to make herself believe because holding to a faith position in spite of evidence to the contrary was especially praised as virtuous in the religious community. A number of participants reported trying hard to believe but finding it impossible to do so. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) describe atheists as those "who could not make themselves believe" (p. 42). Participant reports about trying to believe but being unable to do so run counter to the stereotypes they heard as they grew up that atheists are angry at or rebelling against God.

Several studies indicate that atheists tend to be socially liberal (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Zuckerman, 2008). Participants of this study also reported socially liberal leanings that reinforced their rejection of religion. The negative effects of religious teachings on civil rights and women's issues, the encroachment of conservative religion into American politics, and religion's tendency to negate science were cited as influences on participants' negative evaluation of and rejection of religion. Religious teachings that were considered incompatible with participants' ethics and reason also reinforced their move towards an atheist worldview. The most mentioned elements of Christianity that were considered problematic for participants were the idea that Christianity is exclusively right; a focus on sin and hellfire; conflicts between Christian views and social justice issues; and—the factor that was considered most significant for participants—the rejection of critical thinking in favor of faith.

50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists (Blackford & Schüklenk, 2009) is a series of essays written primarily by philosophers, activists, and scientists about why they eschew religious belief. In a

review of the book, Cragun (2011) noted that the reason most frequently given for an author's disbelief was the lack of evidence for religious claims and the problem of theodicy (the problem of why a good God would permit evil). Like the essayists, participants also endorsed the use of reason or the lack of evidence for religious claims as their primary reason for rejecting belief. However, participants of this study had a different angle on the classic problem of theodicy. One-third of them mentioned a significant dissonance between the ideas of a loving God and one who created a conscious, eternal hell. For them the matter of theodicy was not a question of the idea of a loving God *permitting* evil that did not make sense, but rather the idea of a loving God *creating* evil in the form of everlasting torment.

Seven participants described the process of rejecting religion as akin to removing a filter that had distorted their assessment of reality. This perception is related to participants' frequent use of the idea of religion causing a mind to become closed, unable to receive certain pieces of information or to consider ideas that they feel are counter to religious doctrines. Participants expressed appreciation for the ability to live life as their authentic selves and to cease pretending or attempting to believe in things that they found implausible. Many of them spoke about their appreciation for the ability to experience reality directly rather than having to make assessments through the filter of religious beliefs.

Personal reliance on reason. Although there was not a question regarding the reasons participants adopted an atheist worldview, the preference of participants for science, critical thinking, and curiosity about the world were evident in their responses. Sixteen participants directly addressed the importance of reason in their lives. Participants reported they became atheists because they observed a dissonance between the reality they observed and the conclusions drawn by religious teachings. This is consistent with the findings of Epstein (2009), Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), Hwang et al. (2011), Smith (2011), and Zuckerman (2008) that atheists come to their worldview for intellectual rather than emotional reasons.

Critical thinking was a tool participants used to critique their religious upbringing and explore alternative ideas and responses to their world. Fowler (1981) described a period of individuating and reflective thought that individuals typically work through during their teens and twenties. During this time

young people examine beliefs that were previously held due to social conditioning but which they now critically scrutinize to determine that kind of worldview they wish to adopt for themselves (Stoppa & Lefkowitz, 2010). Most participants reported rejecting religious ideas during the period described by Fowler and then adopting other worldviews out of their reasoning about the nature of the world.

Several mentioned the idea that relying on religious ideas places one's mind in a box or causes a person to have to filter their thoughts and observations through a distorted lens in order to conform to faith or dogma claims. A common theme among participants was that religious faith seemed illogical in light of the evidence provided by science. Participants overwhelmingly cited their critical examination of religious beliefs as the impetus for both abandoning religious and other supernatural perspectives and adopting an atheist worldview. Many reported thoroughly investigating religious ideas rather than rejecting them without consideration of their possible veracity. In fact, several reported that reading the Bible made it clear to them that the scriptures seemed neither factual nor moral. Participants of this study as well as Smith's (2011) reported that interactions and discussions with believers also helped convince them that religious faith was illogical and could not be supported.

Research finds that atheists prefer cognitive reflection (Barrett, 2004; Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006) and have an intellectual orientation (Bullivant and Ruse, 2013). Typical comments from participants were that there is a logical reason behind things and that ideas should be evaluated for their veracity and usefulness. A number of participants pointed out that they found no reason to hold a preference for religious explanations when science made more sense than reliance on faith. Participants reported they preferred to align their thoughts with ideas that were supported by evidence. A comment that was representative of this viewpoint was made by Dave, who noted that for him, "a universe governed by physical laws, untended by any deity, is congruent with the facts I can observe."

Nonsupernatural perspectives of spirituality. Participant responses reflect a rejection of the most common elements of spirituality in the literature, including belief in God, gods, or a higher power (Cliteur, 2009; Ecklund & Long, 2011) and belief in some kind of supernatural or transcendent realm

(Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Rothman, 2009). Other research found that atheists reject supernatural frameworks and standard constructions of spirituality (Hwang et al., 2011; Smith-Stoner, 2007; Zuckerman, 2008) and that atheists who do relate to spirituality formulate their own alternate and nonsupernatural constructions of spirituality (Baker & Smith, 2009; Hwang et al., 2011).

Specific questions were asked of participants about whether they related to spirituality and how they perceived the phenomenon of spirituality. It seemed notable that participants had to describe spirituality using verbiage that is most often used to describe things about which they do not believe. D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) described atheists as nonspiritual, defining 'nonspiritual' as lacking a belief in anything that can be described as a god or higher power and having no belief in such things as having a spirit.

Half the participants find the word 'spirituality' so closely associated with religious and supernatural frameworks that they cannot relate to the word at all. The Baker and Smith (2009) study found an even higher level of atheists who did not relate to the idea of spirituality, with 78% of their atheist participants describing themselves as 'not at all spiritual.' Participants referred to the use of terms such as 'spirituality,' 'soul,' and 'spirit' as useful terminology even though they do not endorse the ideas that are usually meant by those terms and use them in a metaphorical manner.

What is sometimes missed in material about atheists is that atheism is not a belief system but merely the absence of belief in gods or supernatural beings and realms (American Atheists, 2015). Therefore, the worldviews of atheists are unique to the individual because there is no unifying body of belief such as those of most religions. The worldviews that atheists hold are quite variable, though there seem to be some common elements that many atheists endorse:

Creating meaning and purpose. A 'search for' meaning and purpose has been considered an important element of spirituality (Furman et al., 2005) in the social work literature. In contrast, participants spoke of creating their own meaning and purpose. This aligns with the findings of other research (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Hwang et al., 2011; Zuckerman,

2008) that atheists do not seek ‘the meaning of life’ or ‘the purpose of life’, but rather feel they must create their own meaning and purpose through the pursuits, values, and ideas they choose.

Connection. Perhaps it is notable that the word ‘transcendence’ was not used at all by participants even though the term is utilized frequently in formulations of spirituality that have been proposed in the literature, such as that of Canda and Furman (2010). Participants do not endorse the idea of a realm or experience beyond that of the natural. Though they did not speak of ‘transcendence,’ many participants mentioned experiences that could be described as somewhat transcendent. Howell (2009) found that atheists find something akin to transcendence in nature, music, or something that causes them to move beyond themselves. Several participants described a sense of connection through music, particularly when enjoying music with others such as in concerts. Others spoke of feeling a special sense of connection where there is a passionate common interest or purpose around which people gather and take action. One participant described a powerful spiritual experience in looking through a powerful telescope and viewing “amazing things.”

The most common referent to connection was a sense of the interconnection of all of nature. This is consistent with the findings of the Pew Research Center (2012) that 83% of atheists report often or sometimes feeling a sense of connection to nature and the earth. Participants reported feeling something like transcendence in their connection with awe and mystery in nature. A recent article by Ferguson & Tamburello (in press) found that rates of religious affiliation are lower in areas of the United States that have more natural beauty, suggesting that connections with nature can provide alternative means for meeting what could be described as spiritual needs.

Intuitive beliefs. While all participants consciously endorse a reliance on reason and a rejection of supernatural explanations, some noted they can be drawn to explanations that are only possible given supernatural causes. Their examples included instances in which they automatically interpreted something inanimate as a face or being, felt spooked by the dark, felt like ‘something’ was watching them, or felt like a supernatural force like luck or jinxing was in operation. The fact that atheists can interpret phenomena as supernatural seems to attest to the idea that the propensity to believe in supernatural things

exists in the human mind. Research indicates that humans have innate neurobiological and psychological mechanisms that cause them to make instinctual supernatural interpretations of the world (Pyysiäinen, 2001, 2012; Tremlin, 2006). Humans are also drawn to explanatory narratives (Kray et al., 2010).

The experience of participants seems to align with recent studies about intuitive beliefs. One study (Vail, Arndt, & Abdollahi, 2012) found that atheists were less susceptible to stimuli (such as awareness of death) that tend to push Christians, Muslims, and agnostics into higher endorsements of religious and other supernatural perspectives. This could suggest that atheists may have weaker versions of certain instincts that influence humans toward endorsement of supernatural explanations. The results could also mean that atheists activate reasoning processes that tend to refute their immediate, instinctual interpretations of reality as having supernatural explanations.

Despite evidence that most atheists lack a belief in any kind of supernatural beings or realm (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011), three participants reported belief in phenomena that can be described as supernatural. One participant thought it possible that some kind of being prevented her death in a devastating car accident. Another described having the perspective that there is a reason for all that happens, though this would logically seem to require the existence of a higher power orchestrating every detail of life. Another participant wrote that she is still exploring whether anything supernatural exists.

Love and compassion. Many participants spoke about love or compassion as being foundational for an ethical and meaningful life. Two participants cited the Golden Rule that is found in many cultures enjoining humans to ‘love one another’ was important to their life philosophy. Shannon pointed out that the realm of that which is intangible or immeasurable does not equate to the supernatural, which contains beliefs that are insupportable. She noted though love is an intangible thing, people still believe in it and make it a guide for their lives. Four participants wrote that compassion and reason together provide the primary guidance for their personal worldview. This aligns with Bertrand Russell’s (1971, par. 2) idea of “veracity and kindly feeling” working together to create a better world for everyone. Russell, an atheist, proposed that happiness could be created for the entire world if humans could learn to love each other while utilizing critical thinking to obtain knowledge that can be used for their common purposes.

Some ideas of spirituality are closely related to the idea of simple human compassion. Several participants described being kind and caring towards others as a kind of spirituality. Research in nursing found that nurses conflate the idea of good, caring nursing with ‘spiritual’ nursing care (Biro, 2012; McSherry & Jamieson, 2011). When nurses described what they felt were spiritual approaches to patient care, the practices associated with spiritual care consisted of kindly practices having to do with treating patients with respect, small gestures of kindness, and showing compassionate understanding. For these nurses, good nursing care and spiritual care were essentially the same thing.

Challenges in interactions with believers. Despite no question being asked that would elicit responses about this theme, nineteen out of the twenty-two participants reported some kind of difficulty in their interactions with believers. Challenges with believers included encountering stereotypes and biases that framed nonbelievers as immoral or lacking character, attempts to convert them, assumptions that everyone must be or should be a believer, clashes between religious values and social work values and goals, and defensiveness on the part of believers that participants thought caused problems in communication.

It should be noted here that Christianity is mentioned in the findings not to single out one religious belief system as problematic. Rather, the only religious believers participants had interactions with were Christians. This is consistent with statistics about the religious composition of the United States. All but two participants were raised in Christian homes and Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States. Seventy-eight percent of Americans identify as Christian, and some of the 12% who identify as ‘unaffiliated’ hold Christian beliefs though they are not affiliated with an organized religion (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Most participants had little contact with people who hold religious beliefs other than Christian believers, although many discussed interacting with people who identified as ‘spiritual but not religious.’

Offense and taboos. Half the participants—without being asked any specific questions about the subject—brought up their experience that believers can become offended or feel challenged simply by the subject of nonbelief coming up. Eight of the participants brought up the word ‘taboo’ to describe their

perception that religious students seem to feel that even bringing up atheist perspectives was impolite or rude. The students in Mueller's (2012) study of atheist students also reported that atheist students notice religious students becoming easily offended and that this is the reason they tend to avoid conversations about religion. Paley (2010) notes that religious people sometimes portray the "expression of atheism as by definition, arrogant or offensive" (p. 179). Dawkins (2004) has also written about the existence of a taboo against challenging religious formulations and has advocated for the need to normalize critical discussion about religion and spirituality.

Participants used the words 'offended,' 'challenged,' or 'attacked' to describe religious students' responses to dialogue about atheist or other non-Christian perspectives. It was unclear to participants why some interactions caused religious students to become offended even when they thought the dialogue had been civil. Other researchers have noted the ease with which emotions can become triggered during discussions about religion and spirituality (Becker, 2009; Knitter, 2010). Participants voiced their desire that classroom dialogue should be open and genuine in order that students can increase their understanding of worldviews that are different from their own.

The apparent need of religious students to defend their positions may be in part related to developmental issues. A Higher Education Research Council (2004-2005) study of over a hundred thousand students attending 236 diverse colleges and universities found that 57% of the students questioned their religious beliefs. In other words, less than half the students who identified as religious reported feeling secure in their religious beliefs. These statistics indicate that a high percentage of religiously-identified university students may be doubting or reevaluating their faith during their time at university. These students might be susceptible to feeling challenged or threatened due to processes within themselves even in a discussion that may be perceived by others as congenial.

Participants expressed concern about religious students who can feel offended or challenged at times and reported experiencing a conflict between wanting to avoid hurting or offending religious students while also wanting all ideas to be subject to critical review and dialogue. Many of them

discussed their wish that the curriculum develop techniques and assignments for curriculum content on spirituality that can result in more open and challenging dialogue.

Need to acknowledge paradigmatic differences. Perhaps it should be openly acknowledged that persons who hold atheist and faith-based worldviews can assess reality from fundamentally different epistemological frameworks. Believers generally rely on faith, defined as “unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence” (Webster's New World College Dictionary online, n.d.). In contrast, atheists prefer to rely on reason and critical thinking to evaluate their world (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). These differences can cause religious and atheist students to find the other's position inexplicable or untenable. For instance, Mueller (2012) found that atheist college students find believers less rational than skeptics due to their reliance on faith. Religious students can feel that atheist students are not taking into account a realm that is real and vitally important to them.

In order to prepare students for managing issues about worldviews in practice, it would seem useful—even critical—that essential paradigmatic differences between atheist and religious students are acknowledged and addressed with the view of (a) helping students understand what it might be like to hold worldviews that may be significantly different from their own; and (b) preparing students to know what to do when their worldview clashes with social work or agency values and practices.

Atheist students need to come to some understanding of what it might be like for individuals to hold faith positions and religious students need to come to understand how it is that others can hold atheist worldviews. Many atheist students were raised in religious homes and have some firsthand experience of belief. In contrast, some religious students may be experiencing their first real interactions with others who do not share their religious beliefs. Educators can help facilitate this process.

One of the examples of conflicts between worldview values and social work values that was frequently mentioned by participants was the potential clash between religious stances on certain civil rights issues. Especially notable to participants was the issue of GLBT rights. According to the Pew Research Center (2015b), evangelical Christian denominations continue to stand against same-sex marriage, although percentages have changed from the Pew Research Center study in 2001, when

Americans opposed gay marriage by a 57% to 35% margin. In 2015 that margin was reversed, with 39% opposing and 55% supporting gay marriage. Several participants voiced their opinion that the values of justice and equality espoused by the social work profession should override what they view as outdated religious ideas. Indeed, the NASW (2015) is a strong advocate for social justice, advocating that “everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities” (NASW, 2015, par. 2).

Inclusion and dialogue. Four participants stated that in their social work classes spirituality had not been discussed at all or was simply mentioned as one of many cultural diversity factors. Eight participants noted that spirituality was addressed with Christianity as the assumed norm. Most participants mentioned the lack of acknowledgement of spiritual worldviews other than Christianity and that there was no mention of atheism unless the participant brought up the subject.

Kosmin (2013) reports that 33% of the college students in his study reported they had ‘no religion,’ and 28% described themselves as ‘secular.’ A recent Harvard report on its freshman class (Freed & Kahloon, 2015) found that 21% of the Harvard freshman class identifies as agnostic and another 17% identifies as atheist for a total of 38% of new students identifying as decidedly nonreligious. These statistics stand in contrast to the focus the curriculum tends to have on religious worldviews (Senreich, 2013) and the assumption that students will have some kind of religious or spiritual belief. Participants of this study affirmed they thought assumptions are made that religious or supernatural worldviews are universal and that the students themselves all identify with some kind of religious or spiritual perspective. These assumptions are being challenged by information about a growing percentage of nonreligious students. The inclusion of atheist and other nonreligious worldviews in curriculum content on spirituality seems to require acknowledgment and refutation of certain stereotypes.

Stereotypes and discrimination. Harper (2007) reported that religious students hold a number of negative stereotypes about atheists including ideas that atheists are rebellious, immoral, and anti-Christian. Atheist students report they feel some hostility in the campus climate even at universities that are secular (Rockenbach, Mayhew, & Bowman, 2015; Soria et al., 2013). Participants also report they are confronted with stereotypes that they are lacking morals or character because they do not believe in God.

Some have experienced direct antagonism in confrontations with believers in the classroom and in fieldwork positions. These participants report they do not feel welcome to express their worldviews in the classroom because others think atheist views inherently challenge those of believers. Participants report the tone of the discussion can become antagonistic if they speak up. Participants also at times remain silent because they wish to avoid becoming the subject of negative stereotypes about atheists. A common perception is that if most of the class identifies as Christian there is an expectation that everyone will have some kind of religious or spiritual view, even if not Christian. The experience of this group aligns with findings that atheist students can be stigmatized and marginalized (Goodman & Mueller, 2009) and feel less welcomed on campus than religious students (Soria et al., 2013).

Participants are concerned that issues of offense and misunderstanding are not being appropriately handled in the classroom and that educators are missing opportunities for learning through their avoidance of topics that have the potential to create some discomfort. They think normalizing discussion of a wide variety of worldviews, including atheist perspectives, would more accurately reflect the realities students are likely to encounter in practice. This aligns with Bing and Talmadge's study (2008) that found faculty are fearful of discussions about religion and would like to normalize discussions about both religious and naturalist worldviews.

Inclusive language. Participants want curriculum content on spirituality to include discussion of atheist, agnostic, and other nonreligious worldviews and to include material that challenges stereotypes about them. Laura noted that talking about the stereotype that atheists lack morals or are in some kind of rebellion against God would necessitate acknowledging that certain beliefs cannot be considered universally or objectively true. This would require educators to be prepared to break through social taboos while at the same time sensitively managing any difficult discussions that might ensue. Goodman and Mueller (2009) recommend that the subject of atheism should be normalized on campus in order to help nonreligious students feel welcomed and to increase knowledge and understanding about this population.

None of the participants reported remaining completely closeted about their worldview on campus. Almost half the participants report they are open about their atheism and have tried in some way

to normalize discussion about atheist and other nonreligious worldviews. They report speaking out in classes in order to educate their fellow students about their presence and the increasing likelihood of meeting clients who hold atheist and other nonreligious worldviews. Others reported a reluctance to discuss their worldviews in the classroom due to fearing reactions from other members of the class or being judged for their worldview.

Participants recommend the use of more inclusive language. Several pointed out that the word ‘spirituality’ is sometimes considered inclusive but since the word intuitively refers to supernatural elements like gods and a transcendent realm, the term ‘spirituality’ is too restrictive to be inclusive. The current campus focus on spirituality in student development could be inadvertently marginalizing nonreligious students. Goodman and Mueller (2009) suggest jettisoning verbiage about ‘spirituality’ and using conceptualizations about existential well-being concerns instead in student development. Most participants made suggestions about using terminology that can encompass both religious and atheist worldviews, such as ‘philosophy of life’ or ‘worldview.’ Participants are advocating for the use of the word ‘worldview’ in descriptions of classes on spirituality.

Need for a more professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality. Participants had concerns that curriculum content on spirituality seems to have veered away from the professional and academic standards that are evident in other subjects for study in social work education. There were two primary concerns voiced by participants: (a) that professional and academic standards should be upheld with a focus on the purpose of preparing social work students for practice in the area of spirituality; and (b) that while religious and spiritual beliefs should be understood and respected, supernatural aspects of spirituality should not be given an inappropriate academic credence.

Participant responses match the observations of Ai (2002), who found that curriculum content on spirituality was sometimes inappropriate for university level classes. Many participants voiced the view that spirituality should be approached from a scholarly standpoint with the purpose of preparing students to address client well-being and functioning in practice. Participants expressed concerns that spirituality is sometimes treated as if it is a legitimate realm (Senreich, 2013) even though from an academic standpoint

the veracity of spiritual claims cannot be established. For instance, several mentioned the common use of terminology describing humans as comprised of ‘mind, body, and spirit’ as though the existence of a spirit is assumed.

The CSWE Educational Policy 2.1.3 (2015) requires students to be able to integrate research-based knowledge from multiple sources in practice. Relating back to the discussion of acknowledging paradigmatic differences and students having opportunities to learn how it is that others have worldviews that are quite different from their own, participants want to gain a basic understanding about how spiritual beliefs develop in humans. Some mentioned they thought the curriculum should provide a brief summary of information about spirituality from research available from psychology, sociology, neurology, and comparative religions. It seems to be a particular need for atheist students to have a framework that will help them understand and effectively work with their religious clients. The CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2015) Competency 4 requires that the curriculum “engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice” (p. 7) using knowledge from multiple disciplines.

The NASW Cultural Competency Standards (2001) recommend that social work students should be prepared with practice tools and specific standards to be utilized in relation to aspects of cultural competency such as spirituality. Participants reported they did not think curriculum content on spirituality had equipped them with the knowledge and tools they need to utilize in practice in the area of spirituality and worldviews, though they thought this should be the goal of such content. The concern was brought up again and again by participants that they feel the curriculum should equip them with specific knowledge and skills to address worldviews in practice and that they thought they came away from curriculum content on spirituality lacking these practice essentials. Curriculum content on spirituality should align with CSWE guidelines for academically sound educational material that has the outcome of social workers who are prepared for practice in the area of worldviews. The issue of creating a more professional focus for curriculum content on spirituality is covered more extensively in later sections.

Summary. Twenty out of twenty-two participants were raised in religious homes, as are most atheist students in the United States (Mueller, 2012), with the result that their development as atheists was

a personally achieved status (Fiala, 2009). Participants generally followed a traditional developmental trajectory towards atheism that moved from a childhood acceptance of religious narratives into a period of questioning and then adopting atheism (LeDrew, 2013). The primary reason they gave for choosing an atheist worldview was the dissonance they perceived between their observations of reality and religious narratives (Cragun, 2011).

Some participants pointed out that atheism is not a belief system but simply a lack of belief in God or gods (American Atheists, 2015). Participants also report a lack of belief in life after death or the existence of some kind of transcendent realm. Three participants, however, did accommodate some idea of the supernatural: one endorsed the idea that ‘everything happens for a reason;’ one reported that she is open to the idea that some supernatural phenomena could exist; and one participant thought it possible that some kind of supernatural being or power prevented her death in an accident.

Many participants did not relate to the idea of spirituality at all due to its close association with religious ideas and others found spiritual verbiage useful, even though they did not believe in the elements that usually comprise spirituality. Participants described three major formulations for spirituality: (a) the idea that one creates one’s own meaning in life through the values and pursuits that one chooses; (b) a sense of the interconnection of the whole of nature; and (c) the importance of living according to love or compassion. The idea of creating one’s own meaning and purpose, living with compassion as your guide (Russell, 1971), and connection to nature (Howell, 2009) are common referents of spirituality in the literature on atheism.

All but two participants described experiencing some kind of discrimination due to their atheism that ranged from being disowned by parents to confrontations with religious students in which they were called immoral or even unworthy to be social workers. As was reported by Rockenbach et al. (2015), they found the campus could be unwelcoming to atheist students and that it was often assumed that everyone is a believer. Fully half the participants of this study brought up without prompting the phenomenon of believers becoming upset or defensive when the subject of atheism was brought up, even when the discussion seemed cordial. Participants perceived that there were strong taboos against critical evaluation

of religion and that these taboos created significant barriers to dialogue and learning in curriculum content on spirituality. Other researchers have noted that emotional reactivity often arises in curriculum content on spirituality (Becker, 2009) and that there are taboos in place that can create difficulties in discourse with the religious (Paley, 2010).

Participants thought it essential that curriculum content on spirituality should have a professional focus on material that will provide them with the specific knowledge and tools they need for practice in the area of worldviews, feeling that this should be the basic foundation for all curriculum content on spirituality. They want educators who will teach material about spirituality and worldviews to receive specific training that will enable them to effectively manage difficult dialogue. Participants recommend the use of inclusive language like ‘worldview’ or ‘lifescape’ to replace verbiage that seems to assume everyone has religious or other supernatural beliefs.

Implications for Theory/Conceptualizations for Teaching Content on Spirituality

The purpose of this study was not to generate theory but to gain emergent understandings of a sample of atheist social work students’ experiences and perspectives about spirituality and curriculum content on spirituality. This study brought up considerations that were not originally anticipated by the researcher and that echo theoretical concerns about curriculum content that have been previously discussed, including: (a) inaccurate assumptions that religious and other spiritual worldviews are universal human constructs and concerns (Goodman, 2014); (b) an unquestioned acceptance of a supernatural realm as a legitimate paradigm (Hoyt, 2008); and (c) the lack of a “consistent conceptualization of spirituality” for social work education (Senreich, 2013, p. 548).

The curriculum tends to formulate religious and spiritual beliefs as universal human phenomena (Rovers & Kocum, 2010) despite information that 13% of the world’s population identifies as “convinced atheists” (WIN-Gallup International, 2012, p. 2)—terminology that suggests this demographic not only lacks religious beliefs but also actively adopts a naturalist worldview. From the WIN-Gallup statistics and with the world population at almost 7.4 billion people (Worldometers, 2015), the number of atheists in the world could total almost one billion people. The evidence indicates that spirituality—or at the least its

religious and supernatural frameworks—is not a universal human construct and that therefore theoretical conceptualizations of spirituality should be revised to incorporate more accurate formulations of the worldview landscape.

Participants echoed concerns that have been expressed in the literature that supernatural formulations of spirituality are often presented as if they are to be understood as objectively true (Crook-Lyon et al., 2012; Hoyt, 2008; Hwang et al., 2011; Paley, 2010). Most religious and spiritual perspectives hold that supernatural phenomena are realities that are important for making sense of the world. The social work literature reflects some confusion about what to do with the mystical elements of spirituality. Research from multiple disciplines has explicated natural factors including psychological, neurological, biological, and sociocultural influences that make the supernatural seem likely and that form the basis upon which cultural influences form supernatural beliefs (Pyysiäinen, 2010; Tremlin, 2006).

Social work standards advocate addressing spirituality and worldviews from the client's perspective (Holloway & Moss, 2010) while holding to research-based standards. Educators seem torn between the need to anchor curriculum content in research-based, professional standards and the need to respect diverse worldviews. Perhaps the wish to respect cultural diversity in material on spirituality has unintentionally extended into cultural norms that inhibit addressing human spirituality from a critical standpoint and contribute to problems with finding a consistent conceptual clarity (Senreich, 2013). There is indeed a need to acknowledge and honor differing beliefs and cultures, but curriculum content does not have to endorse or contest the veracity of supernatural phenomena to address spirituality in both an academically appropriate and a culturally sensitive manner.

Curriculum content on spirituality and worldviews in social work should emerge from the requirement that it must effectively prepare students with the knowledge and practice skills they need to effectively work with clients about worldview issues. The professional agencies that oversee social work education and professional social work practice (the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers) contain guidelines for cultural competency that are utilized widely and are extended into training about worldviews. These guidelines include the primacy of client empowerment,

focusing on the strengths of client worldviews, and the primary task of increasing client well-being and functioning (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2007).

Though there are many ideas in the literature for curriculum content on spirituality, there is little consistency about what should be included in the curriculum or how to go about the task of training students in the area of worldviews (Ai, Moultime, Picciano, Nagda, & Hendrickson Thurman, 2004, p. 111). From the perspectives of participants of this study and the literature, it seems that much of the difficulty with inconsistency in carrying out the NASW and CSWE guidelines in actual curriculum content may lie in the matter of spirituality as a difficult topic to manage in the classroom.

A conceptual curricular model for teaching content about spirituality and worldviews could provide focus for guidelines that are already in place but which seem to be inconsistently utilized within curriculum content on worldviews. Advancements have been made in learning to handle other potentially difficult subjects like race in the classroom (e.g., Sue et al., 2009), and the social work literature is beginning to address managing difficult dialogues about spirituality and worldviews. Educators can fear bringing up certain topics or losing control of discussions on spirituality (Bing & Talmadge, 2008), feel unprepared, and afraid of offending someone (Shaw et al., 2012). According to Sue et al. (2009), the most important element of effective dialogue in the classroom is the preparation of the educator to lead difficult dialogues.

The perspectives and insights provided by the participants of this study, coupled with information from the literature, suggest that for the purposes of curriculum content on spirituality, spirituality would best be approached by the educator teaching the content from a constructivist paradigm. Senreich (2013) advocates for spirituality being addressed as human constructions about things that cannot be known (p. 553). Social constructs are representations of reality constructed by humans to make sense of their experience and ascribe meaning to it (Appleton & King, 2002)—a definition that seems to fit spirituality perfectly. From a constructivist perspective spirituality is a human construct arising from an interaction of sociocultural, biological, psychological, and other influences (Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010; Tremlin, 2006).

A constructivist perspective on spirituality that is presented using constructivist teaching methods could ground curriculum content by eschewing the attempt to somehow incorporate supernatural material into curriculum content. Hoyt (2008) suggests the term ‘spirituality’ should be used for those things that are intuitively associated with things of the ‘spirit’ (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Hwang et al., 2011) and the supernatural, such as gods and a transcendent realm. Non-supernatural elements that are often associated with spirituality in the literature—meaning and purpose, ethics, living a compassionate life, interconnection, etc.—are perhaps better referred to as ‘worldview’ matters.

Framing spirituality and worldviews as constructions has the potential to ease emotional reactivity and increase the efficacy of difficult dialogues about spirituality and worldviews. As constructions, no worldview has privilege and all worldviews are subject to critical discussion (Gergen, 2009; McCarty, 2009). Perhaps it is worth noting that within the context of the benefits or negative effects of worldviews, whether they are objectively true or not is of little consequence. What matters in social work practice is the ability of social workers to understand and address worldviews from the standpoint of their clients perspectives (Holloway & Moss, 2010).

Suggestions for Curriculum Content on Spirituality

Participants brought up a number of concerns for the curriculum that are considered in the light of CSWE and NASW guidelines. The findings from this study were evaluated along with the literature to produce a number of general suggestions for the improvement of curriculum content on worldviews. Recommendations are suggested for content on spirituality and worldviews in the social work curriculum: (a) curriculum content should be academically appropriate with a primary focus on the professional preparation of social work students to address spirituality and worldviews in social work practice; (b) educators should approach worldviews as human constructions and should handle mystical elements of spirituality as cultural phenomena about which there will not be debate; (c) language and content should be inclusive; (d) biases, stereotypes, and assumptions should be acknowledged and examined; (e) techniques for effective dialogue should be developed for use in the curriculum; and (g) educators should have specific training to appropriately handle material on spirituality.

Table 4 provides a brief summary of the following suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality.

Table 4
Suggestions for Curriculum Content on Spirituality

Professional focus with academically appropriate content	A professional focus in curriculum content on spirituality should arise from social work values and practice guidelines (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2007) with the primary goal of preparing social work students for practice in the area of worldviews. The curriculum should incorporate research-based knowledge from multiple disciplines to provide an academically sound and evolving knowledge base about human worldviews.
Spirituality and worldviews as social constructions	Educators should conceptualize spirituality and worldviews from a constructivist lens. From a constructivist paradigm, spirituality is a human construct arising from an interaction of sociocultural, biological, psychological, and other influences (Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010). Constructivist teaching methods that emphasize the meaning-making between educators and students are emphasized (McAuliffe, 2011). Supernatural elements of spirituality should be treated as cultural phenomena.
Inclusive language and content	Students gain a sense of religious/worldview plurality through gaining knowledge from multiple disciplines about human worldviews (Laurence, 1999). Students come to understand that many people hold religious or supernatural worldviews, while others have naturalist worldviews. The term 'worldview' is suggested as more inclusive than 'spirituality.'
Examination of biases, stereotypes, assumptions, and privilege	Difference, biases, and stereotypes about worldviews should be deliberately addressed because their presence can damage the social worker's ability to effectively work with clients who hold worldviews that are different from their own. Information should be provided that challenges stereotypes and the curriculum should provide exercises in which students practice interacting with people whose worldviews differ from their own.
Creating space for dialogue	The curriculum should recognize that content on worldviews can present challenges similar to those that arise during difficult dialogues on race. The classroom should be a safe space for students while also providing opportunities for challenging dialogue designed to increase understanding and develop skills for managing dialogue across difference. Dialogue with guidelines for descriptive presentations of difference without resorting to justificatory stances can encourage experiences of increased understanding of differing worldviews (Gergen, 2009).
Suggested training for educators	Educators should receive specific training for teaching content on spirituality that includes knowledge, skills for practice, and training to effectively lead safe and challenging dialogue (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Educators need to become aware of and able to manage their own biases and reactivity.

Professional focus with academically appropriate content. Participants voiced concerns that curriculum content on spirituality is not taking a consistently professional and academically appropriate focus on its goal of preparing social work students with the knowledge and skills they need to address worldviews in practice. Though many of them expressed appreciation for what they did learn, most participants mentioned their perspective that the curriculum had not adequately prepared them for practice with spirituality and worldviews. Their perspectives prompted a return to the literature and produced a number of suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality.

Constructivist theoretical framework. It is proposed that educators address spirituality as a human construction and approach the mystical elements of spirituality as cultural phenomena. A constructivist approach to worldviews posits that spiritualities and other worldviews arise from a mixture of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (Pyysiäinen & Hauser, 2010). Such an approach eschews debate about the veracity of any worldview (Gergen, 2009) and could thus provide a safe environment for dialogue in which students describe rather than debate worldviews (McCarty, 2009). The educator helps students learn to view worldviews as cultural phenomena that are assessed using social work values and practice methods for their effect on client well-being and functioning (NASW, 2015).

A constructivist theoretical framework of worldviews extends into the use of constructivist educational methods as appropriate for teaching about constructions like spiritualities and worldviews. Constructivist teaching methods that recognize and utilize the active meaning-making between students and educators are appropriate for teaching about spirituality and worldviews (McAuliffe, 2011). According to Watts (2011), a constructivist teaching environment fosters curiosity and embraces difference and plurality with educator and student views alike considered open to challenge and reflection. Shaw et al. (2012) note that if all worldviews are constructions and reflexivity is fostered, there is no worldview that is to be considered ‘right.’ This fosters a nonjudgmental atmosphere in the classroom that encourages curiosity, openness, and understanding.

Research-based research and knowledge. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) advocates research-based approaches to learning. In terms of teaching about spirituality and worldviews, research-based knowledge refers to practice knowledge about spirituality and worldviews. Educational Policy 2.1.3 provides the general guideline that students should be provided with research-based knowledge from multiple disciplines. In reference to worldviews, students would benefit from having some understanding of human spirituality from the standpoint of recent research from disciplines like biology, psychology, and sociology. Human constructions such as spirituality are in a constant state of change within cultures and historical timeframes. Social work education is expected to provide students with the tools to utilize critical thinking and research-based interventions in their practice.

CSWE Educational Policy 2.16 requires the use of research-based interventions in practice and the use of scientific and academically appropriate approaches to learning (CSWE, 2015). The social work curriculum is required to teach social work students how to “access, analyze, interpret, and appropriately employ evidence” (CSWE, 2016, par. 1). The use of research-based research and knowledge in curriculum content on spirituality does not imply that knowledge about spiritualities and worldviews are fixed and that a specific knowledge base can be appropriated for curriculum content on spirituality that will provide some kind of definitive store of knowledge to students. Spiritual worldviews are in a constant state of change and differ greatly across cultures and time and between individuals. Students do need to use research-based interventions (CSWE, 2016) and utilize up-to-date practice skills.

Despite the preponderance of articles on religion and spirituality in the literature, a few writers have made a charge of bias against religious values in the literature (Hodge, 2007; Hodge, 2009; Slife & Reber, 2009). Alcock (2009) responded to their charge of bias by pointing out that prejudice against individuals or groups differs from a scientific bias that is necessary to conduct academically sound research and education. Senreich (2013) advises that social work education should not assume that spiritual phenomena exist as objective realities but rather as “subjective perspectives” (p. 552). Hoyt (2008) suggests that the term ‘spirituality’ should be utilized only when referencing the supernatural elements of spirituality. Mystical elements of spirituality should be treated as cultural phenomena.

Professional focus on social work values and needs. The need for a professional focus based on social work values and skills is supported by CSWE (2015) and NASW (2007) standards for social work education and practice. CSWE and NASW mandates are too general to provide specific guidelines for curriculum content on spirituality. These guidelines merely mention spirituality as one aspect of human diversity (CSWE, 2015). However, both the Council on Social Work Education (2015) and the National Association for Social Workers (2007) contain broad guidelines that are pertinent to curriculum content on spirituality and that can inform the development of guidelines that describe the necessary set of knowledge and skills needed to prepare social work students for competency in spirituality.

The CSWE (2015) requires an understanding of diversity and how it shapes individual experience and well-being. Under this rubric spirituality should be considered in terms of what it means for those for whom it has meaning (Crisp, 2010) and should be assessed according to the negative and positive effects it has on client well-being and functioning. This would seem to require opening up dialogue about both the benefits and harms of religious beliefs. Social workers are also required to advocate for human rights and to conduct their practice to advance justice under the rubric of social work values and perspectives (NASW, 2007), which suggests the need for discussion about conflicts that may exist between religious beliefs and social work values and goals.

The NASW requires that students scrutinize their biases and examine how their own worldview could affect their practice with diverse clients (NASW, 2007). Students need to learn to examine how their worldviews align or conflict with social work ethics, values, and practice and know how to effectively resolve any dilemmas that may present themselves. In the experience of participants of this study, the curriculum was particularly unprepared to accomplish the tasks of confronting reactivity, biases, and conflicts between worldview values and social work or justice values. The purposeful development of content and dialogic techniques may help resolve these challenges.

Use of appropriate assignments. Exercises in which students examine their own worldviews are meant to help students become better equipped to address the needs of their clients through self-awareness (Gergen, 2009; Hodge, 2006). Study participants reported that their experience of such exercises was that they were at times unsuitable for their academic purpose and could be described as inappropriate material for university level coursework (Ai, 2002). Rather than endorsing self-exploration exercises that sometimes take forms that can seem similar to self-help group exercises, the NASW mandates that students examine their own cultural identities *in order to* “increase awareness of personal assumptions, values, and biases” (NASW, 2007, p. 18-19). Sheafor and Horesji (2012) recommend that social work students examine their personal worldviews to become aware of how these can affect their work with specific clients. To meet CSWE and NASW guidelines, the goal of assignments designed to

help students explore their own spirituality should have the purpose of preparing students to appropriately address issues about spirituality and existential well-being in social work practice.

A common assignment involves having students experience contact with a religious or spiritual group they are not familiar with. Typical verbiage for this assignment is taken from Hodge's (2006) assignment in which each student confronts a "faith group whose value system differs substantially from their own" (p. 92). Such assignments can be valuable and important learning experiences, and participants found them particularly interesting. However, the wording of such assignments seems to contain an assumption that the student has a 'faith' or 'spirituality' of some kind and excludes those who have nonreligious or atheist worldviews. Students who do not identify with a religious group may feel marginalized when such wording gives the impression that religious belief is normative. Perhaps instead an assignment of this kind could read, "Experience an interaction with a group whose worldview differs significantly from your own." Students could be asked to keep an open mind from the standpoint of a professional social worker who is interested in understanding what is important for this group.

Inclusive language and content. The campus climate can be hostile towards atheists (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2015; Soria et al., 2013) and there are often assumptions that everyone is religious or spiritual. Participants reported that Christianity is often assumed as the norm. It is the dominant religion in the United States with 78% of Americans identifying as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Both the language that is used and the content that is covered should be considered when developing a more inclusive framework for discussion of worldviews in social work education and practice.

Participants view current curriculum content on spirituality as having a very narrow focus primarily on Christian perspectives and think students should be given the opportunity to learn about the variety of worldviews present in the world. Laurence (1999) recommended that students gain a sense of religious/worldview plurality, a sense of how others find different ways to interpret the world. One way to help students think about the broader view of worldviews might be to include content that explores worldview typologies rather than providing only material about a few specific religions. The idea of

typologies refers to major frameworks for worldviews and could include typologies like eastern religions, monotheistic religions, New Age and alternative or individual spiritualities, and atheist/naturalist worldviews. Discussions about these typologies as well as specific religions could help students broaden their perspective about various worldviews from a narrow focus on dogma ‘otherness’ into dialogue about the differences and similarities in the way humans construct meaning.

Signifiers like ‘spiritual,’ ‘atheist,’ ‘believe,’ or ‘God’ hold different meanings and connotations for different cultures and individuals. All are embedded within specific individual experiences and temporal/societal settings that lend different meanings to similar verbiage (Holloway & Moss, 2010). Words and phrases can be ‘gateway’ terms that open up dialogue about a cluster of concepts (p. 33). Curriculum content on spirituality should clarify for social work students that their clients’ interpretations of the same words and ideas are likely to differ from their own (Crisp, 2010).

Senreich (2013) advocates for a perspective of spirituality for social work education that is capable of representing each individual’s unique conceptualization of spirituality and that is also clearly identifiable as a different aspect than the traditional designations of biological, psychological, and social. Senreich proposed the following inclusive definition of spirituality:

Spirituality refers to a human being's subjective relationship (cognitive, emotional, and intuitive) to what is unknowable about existence, and how a person integrates that relationship into a perspective about the universe, the world, others, self, moral values, and one's sense of meaning. (p. 553)

The term ‘spirituality’ is sometimes intended as all-inclusive, but discussions using the term often move into assumptions about religious paradigms (Goodman & Teraguchi, 2008), and the term has a strong association with religious and other supernatural elements. The deliberate use of inclusive language in curriculum content on spirituality could model inclusiveness of all varieties of religious, spiritual, and naturalist worldviews that could help students obtain a pluralistic view of worldviews. ‘Worldview’ refers to an overall perspective through which an individual interprets reality (Huang & Shih, 2011) and is suggested as a more inclusive term than ‘spirituality.’

One suggestion is that the words ‘spirituality,’ ‘naturalism,’ and ‘worldviews’ could all be utilized for curriculum content on spirituality. The word ‘spirituality’ would refer to supernatural frameworks such as religious and other supernatural beliefs (Hoyt, 2008); ‘naturalism’ would refer to perspectives that come from non-supernatural frameworks such as atheism; and ‘worldview’ would be used as a term that refers to the overall framework with which an individual interprets the world (Huang & Shih, 2011; Schilders, Sloep, Peled, & Boersma, 2009), that can be religious, spiritual, or naturalist/atheist.

Questions that can be asked for the development of inclusive language include: Is the language of assignments, lectures, readings, and exercises inclusive, or does it contain inherent biases and assumptions? How can a worldview framework be articulated for curriculum content on spirituality that is inclusive of all religious, spiritual, and atheist perspectives? What terminology can best help students understand the plurality of worldviews?

Examination of biases, stereotypes, assumptions, and privilege. The NASW provides the general guideline that social workers need to be able to respond “respectfully and effectively” to diversity (NASW, 2001, p. 13). Curriculum content on spirituality should help students examine their “own cultural backgrounds and identities to increase awareness of personal assumptions, values, and biases” (pp. 18-19) (NASW, 2007). Differences, stereotypes, and biases should be directly acknowledged and addressed in the curriculum because they can damage a social worker’s ability to work effectively and respectfully with clients whose worldviews differ from their own (NASW, 2007). Students must become equipped to practice managing their biases and reactivity and to use case consultation and supervision to resolve issues that can come up in practice.

Biases and stereotypes. Rockenbach et al. (2015) found that atheist students often feel that the climate on campuses was more negative for them than for believers even on a secular campus. Due to stereotypes that abound and a perceived hierarchy of beliefs with Christianity at the top and atheism at the bottom, atheist students report less of a sense of belonging than do religious students and so tend to keep silent about their worldviews (Soria et al., 2013). The literature can be seen as supporting participants’

views. The current focus on spirituality on campuses can have the unintended consequence of causing those with atheist worldviews to feel marginalized (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Christian students hold privilege on the American campus through assumptions that ‘everyone is Christian’ and because Christian cultural influences are embedded in the culture (Seifert, 2007).

Atheist students can be affected by stereotypes that a lack of religious belief is associated with a lower level of personal integrity (Banerjee et al., 2010) and that atheists lead “shallow and superficial” lives (Norman, 2006, p. 486). Participants report having their values and integrity questioned due to their lack of theistic beliefs, sometimes in very personal ways. The stereotype that only believers have integrity was brought home to one participant who was told after class by another student that she could not be a good social worker because she is an atheist.

Participants also report holding biases against believers. They think reliance on faith can be a detriment to the believer’s ability to reason about things that conflict with their faith. The word ‘close-minded’ came up frequently when participants described their perception that some believers hold backward ideas about social justice and science. Atheist students in Jones’ (2008) study also viewed highly religious students as close-minded and holding backward views of civil rights issues and science.

Privilege. Social work students can benefit from critical examination of privilege because social work values and practice necessitate being aware of and working against discrimination, oppression, and injustice (NASW, 2008). The literature indicates that both believers and atheists can feel the other is privileged on campus. Jones found that Christian students can feel like minorities on campus, which was a surprising finding given that atheist participants perceived an atmosphere of Christian privilege in those same (secular) universities (2008). A few writers have noted some discrimination in social work against those who hold religious worldviews. Hodge (2007) found that some religious students reported that their religious beliefs were criticized to the point where they felt silenced. One participant in this study noted that in her experience it was religious beliefs that had “a negative stigma” in her social work cohort.

Knowledge and dialogue that counter biases, stereotypes, and privilege. The atheist students in Sriprakash, Possamai, & Brackenreg’s (2014) study of religious diversity at an Australian university

noticed that in their experience, Christian and Muslim students have negative views of atheism because they usually know nothing about atheists other than the negative stereotypes they have heard in their churches or mosques. The authors point out that stereotypes and misunderstandings of atheism fuel oppositional interactions between students on campus.

Some participants mentioned they wished the curriculum had allowed them to talk about how to handle difficult situations they might face with clients as when, for instance, a client has strong Biblical beliefs that she should ‘submit to’ her abusive husband. The general consensus on the part of participants is that hesitancy and fear on the part of both educators and students inhibits discussion about some of the things that might be the most useful topics to help prepare them for practice around spirituality and worldviews.

Readings from the literature could provide information that may be used to educate students about stereotypes. For instance, a recent study found that atheist students score lower on spiritual identification factors than those who identify with religion or spirituality, yet they also score high on qualities that are often considered spiritual qualities, such as equanimity, charitable involvement, ethic of care, and holding a pluralistic or ecumenical worldview (Goodman, 2014). The study showed that atheist students have high scores on moral qualities that are considered spiritual without identifying with any religion or spirituality. Discussion about this study could dispel some negative stereotypes about atheists.

Participants frequently brought up the point that they felt the curriculum did not prepare them to work with clients whose worldviews are different from their own. Swidler (2008) suggests that students work together in dyads with another student whose worldview differs from their own to develop inter-worldview dialogue skills using specific techniques under the direction of the educator. Classroom activities and cultural experiences outside the classroom can provide opportunities for students to practice managing their assumptions and biases and provide effective ways for students to learn about different worldviews.

If those who hold atheistic worldviews are not included in the discussion, social workers will presumably find themselves inadequately trained to understand and help nonreligious clients. D’Andrea

and Sprenger (2007) developed specific recommendations for working with atheist clients that can provide guidance to counter stereotypes about atheists: To prepare for work with atheist clients, social workers should be equipped to recognize their reactions to an atheist perspective and be ready to guide the client with affirmation and understanding of their worldview. Social workers should avoid making assumptions about how atheists view the world and should be equipped to use the atheist client's own worldview with its unique values and perspectives on life to help the client achieve a higher level of functioning and well-being. Working with atheist clients effectively requires some knowledge about the attributes and values atheists are likely to have.

Pertinent questions. Curriculum content on spirituality can benefit from asking questions such as: What must be learned about specific stereotypes that can mitigate their effects on the social worker-client relationship? What techniques of case consultation can be utilized to help students manage their emotional responses to case material? What material from the literature will be useful to help counter biases, reactivity, and stereotypes? What assignments and exercises can be included in curriculum content on spirituality to help students manage their biases and assumptions?

Creating space for dialogue. Perhaps the most pressing need for curriculum content on spirituality is the development of safe yet challenging spaces for dialogue about spirituality. Difficult dialogues are avoided when subjects cause discomfort, and yet moving into the discussion of hard topics could provide an antidote for the unease that can inhibit dialogue. Engaging in difficult dialogues can help students work through their discomfort and biases to become able to work with professional grace with clients whose worldviews differ from their own.

The challenge of difficult dialogues about worldviews in the classroom has begun to be addressed in relation to the conflicts that can exist between religious beliefs and social justice issues, particularly in the area of GLBT rights (Knitter, 2010; McCarty, 2009). Research on difficult dialogues on race can provide information that can assist in the task of formulating useful, challenging, yet safe discussions about difference in worldviews.

Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera (2009) define difficult dialogues in the classroom as those with the potential to feel threatening to members of the class. Their study was on discussions about race and the perceptions of students of color about those discussions. The findings of Sue et al.'s study are pertinent to the difficulties that participants report in discussions about spirituality. Most of the elements noted by the authors as factors that can cause difficult dialogues about race are potentially present in classes on spirituality: (a) some of the students hold a position of privilege as a dominant worldview; (b) there are significant differences in worldview perspectives; (c) the views of some seem challenging or offensive to others; (d) discussion is likely to reveal some biases and prejudices; and (e) emotional reactivity is likely (p. 184). Students of color as well as atheist students can remain silent when they feel there is a lack of support from other classmates and they fear negative reactions from the class. Sue et al., (2009) found that the role of the educator is significant. When the educator is trained and prepared to create a safe environment, intervene when necessary, and to allow challenging topics to be spoken, difficult dialogues can be conducted that bring new understandings to the classroom.

Difficult dialogues can occur when the discussion is likely to bring up biases and emotional reactivity is triggered (Sue et al., 2009), as often happens when spirituality is discussed in the classroom. The findings of this study highlight issues that can negatively affect dialogue about spirituality in the social work classroom, including: (a) emotional reactivity; (b) stereotypes and assumptions that get in the way of mutual understanding; (c) social proscriptions against the critical evaluation of religion and spirituality; (d) avoidance and fear of the topic by both students and educators; and (e) the unpreparedness of educators to manage effective dialogue on the topic of spirituality.

The atheist participants of this study reported feeling it was often not safe to talk about their worldviews due to negative stereotypes about atheists. This is consistent with other studies of atheist students who report they feel stigmatized or even demonized by religious students (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Nash, 2003). Similarly, religious students report they feel discriminated against and do not feel safe to discuss their beliefs in the classroom (Thyer & Myers, 2009). Despite the challenges, the NASW

(2001) mandates that social workers learn to become comfortable discussing cultural differences, including worldview differences.

Need to counter cultural taboos. Participants perceive cultural proscriptions against speaking freely about different religious, spiritual, and worldview perspectives. They think religion and spirituality are accorded an exemption from critical examination that has the consequence of inhibiting open dialogue and opportunities for learning. Dawkins (2004) and Paley (2010) also note a high level of deference given to religion and spirituality that prevents dialogue from being conducted on these subjects with the critical analysis that is routinely allowed most other topics.

In relation to the presence of proscriptions against the critical evaluation of religion and spirituality, participants noticed that religious students can react with offense and a sense of feeling challenged during discussions even when the dialogue does not seem threatening or particularly controversial. When this occurs, participants think the focus often moves to the religious students' feelings rather than maintaining a focus on whatever discussion topic had caused the upset. Similarly, Sue et al. (2009), reporting on difficult dialogues about race in the classroom, noted that minority students feel that when discussions become difficult, all too often the white students' feelings are soothed at the expense of discussion about matters that seem important for the class to work through.

Managing emotional reactivity and offense. Participants express they also can feel emotionally reactive in the classroom and want educators to intervene to maintain civil and reasonable dialogue rather than ending the conversation just because students are becoming emotionally aroused. Becker (2009) notes it is not discussion about spirituality that poses difficulties but rather "the affective response to it" that presents the challenge (p. 703). Knitter (2010) notes that emotion and imagination are central to religious perspectives and experiences. Understanding worldviews does not just involve having an understanding of dogma or belief systems but must take into account the emotional elements of the other's worldview (Swidler, 2008).

Sue et al. (2009) contend that students and educators both need to experience some kind of "lived reality" (p. 189) that involves interaction and dialogue with the 'other.' Hodge's (2006) assignment to

have an experience with those who hold a different worldview seems to contain a number of inadvertent assumptions. The wording is that students should have an experience with a “faith group whose value system differs substantially from their own” (p. 92). This could be interpreted as implying a focus on different hierarchical value systems, with the word ‘faith’ implying that all students should have a faith of some kind. Perhaps there is a more beneficial approach that can be taken. The NASW Indicators and Standards for Cultural Competency (2007) require students to become familiar with and to understand “(what) constitutes a good life, personal well-being, and community well-being” to the other (p. 23). To give an assignment to specifically investigate another group’s ideas about the ‘good life’ might portray an expectation that the focus will be on a deeper understanding of common human goals and ideals rather than on differences that cannot be reconciled. Perhaps the wording could be that the student will “interact with a group whose worldview differs from yours with the view of understanding their ideals and what they think constitutes a good life for individuals and communities.”

The phenomenon of offense or challenge warrants a closer look due to its negative effect on dialogue in the classroom. Participants who ventured theories about why some religious students feel challenged or offended posited that the root seems to be in the idea that their religious beliefs require defense rather than allowing for discussion. They thought some discussions may bring up doubts or insecurities about religious beliefs or that religious students may feel disrespected or misunderstood because they believe in phenomena that some others may find implausible.

The literature brings up theories that could bring insight into possible reasons for the occurrence of offense during seemingly innocuous discussions. In a meta-analysis of mortality salience studies, worldview defense increased when participants were exposed to ideas that threatened their formulations about life after death (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). Even exposure to thoughts about atheism can raise existential threats and negative reactions in religious believers (Cook, Cohen, & Solomon, 2015). It appears that the presence of atheist students—as persons who do not believe in life after death or the oversight of a god—may inadvertently arouse existential threats and an increased need for believers to defend their worldviews.

Christina (2014) posits that religion is maintained by social consent and reinforced by various social interactions and conventions that support it. Any denial of belief—even if only a declaration of a lack of belief—may deny the social support for religious belief that is expected and create negative feelings. Students of traditional college age are likely to be evaluating their worldviews during this time of their life (Small, 2008). Religious students may be experiencing cognitive dissonance between the religious views they have been taught and the ideas and experiences they are having in the college setting. Religious students are sometimes afraid that exposure to other worldviews might jeopardize their faith (Lelwica, 2008). These factors could increase the level of emotional reactivity under some circumstances. Sensitivity about these issues is needed to maintain a setting that feels safe to all students (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

Classes could benefit from cognitive behavioral techniques that help people learn to manage emotions, as well as various spiritual practices that help people look upon others with understanding and compassion. Whatever the cause of the reactions that participants have noted, the challenge to curriculum content on spirituality is to find the means to help students overcome fears and defenses in order to move into the open discussions that can prepare them to manage difference in their fieldwork.

Dialogic techniques. Participants note that both students and educators are hesitant to discuss difficult topics about spirituality, but avoiding dialogue can result in missed opportunities to understand the other (Palmer, 1983). Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) suggest that dialogue is beneficial when worldview discussions combine openness with critical examination. Jones (2008) notes that dialogue differs from conversation and debate in that it involves listening with the intent to better understand and a willingness to be affected by the other's viewpoint.

Ideas that might help achieve the goals of decreasing defensiveness and facilitating useful dialogue are (a) educators approaching worldviews as human constructions and using constructivist teaching methods; and (b) utilizing deliberately descriptive verbiage for dialogue. Utilizing a constructivist approach to conceptualizations of spirituality would mean that all worldviews are examined as human constructs articulated from sociocultural and other influences (Gergen, 2009). Within this

framework no worldview is privileged. Each person in the dialogue brackets the idea that his or her beliefs constitute the ‘right,’ ‘true,’ or ‘best’ framework in order to open up dialogue towards understanding the other (Gergen, 2009). Discussion is fostered that allows for the voicing of emerging ideas rather than the ‘right’ answer (Shaw et al., 2012). Discussions do not revolve around the defense or refutation of positions but rather on mutual understanding (Swidler, 2008).

Gergen (2009) recommends that all spiritual worldviews should be approached in a descriptive manner with the expectation that their veracity is not to be investigated within the dialogue. Each participant in the discussion describes their worldview rather than defends it, leaving off the need to justify or defend their position. Educators should be alert for wording that reflects positions of ‘truth’ or ‘rightness,’ because such verbiage indicates the conversation has become justificatory or defensive. Using this method, a discussion will tend to feel safe for all as long as participants in the discussion maintain the use of a descriptive framework (McCarty, 2009).

It should be remembered that spiritual beliefs often revolve around things that are held to be more important than truth, such as ultimate meaning. For the purposes of professional social work it does not matter whether client beliefs are ‘true’ but rather to what extent a particular worldview position can negatively or positively affect the well-being and functioning of a client or client system (NASW, 2007).

Students can learn to find common ground through examining ideas that may be different but that serve much the same purpose. The same act of kindness may represent ‘God’s love’ or ‘good karma’ or ‘compassion’ (Gergen, 2009). It can be helpful for students to examine various religious and spiritual practices that serve similar purposes (Lelwica, 2008), such as prayer, meditation, or a walk in the woods.

Perhaps the essential element of effective dialogue for curriculum content on spirituality is that it should result in students coming to understand what it might be like for someone to hold a worldview that is different from their own. It is important to explore common ground while also acknowledging that significant differences exist between religious and atheist worldviews. Believers and atheists assess reality using fundamentally different epistemological frameworks. The fact that significant paradigmatic differences exist between worldviews can cause the others’ position to seem inexplicable. These

differences can be described using terminology that shows respect and appreciation. Utilizing a constructivist teaching approach of mutual meaning-making using descriptive language for the purpose of mutual understanding seems to have the potential to provide a safe environment. If students feel safe, they are able to discuss and explore differences that can be perplexing without fearing that the veracity of their beliefs or philosophy of life will come under scrutiny.

The educator's role. Gaining some understanding of why and how negative feelings can be aroused in students who hold different worldviews can result in the development of teaching techniques that effectively manage situations in which emotions or defenses are aroused. Specific techniques can be developed to help students and educators work through reactivity effectively rather than avoiding or dismissing dialogue that could be presenting prime opportunities for learning and growth for the class. According to Jones (2008), educators can have an important role in helping students conduct authentic dialogue with themselves and with others as they evaluate their worldviews.

Difficult dialogues can provide excellent opportunities for students to learn to handle their biases and triggers and become better prepared to utilize appropriate practice skills with clients of differing worldviews. However, participants found that educators were afraid to bring up various topics about worldviews and were hesitant to continue discussions when difficult topics were discussed. Bing and Talmadge (2008) found that educators had fears about bringing up religious topics and were afraid of losing control of ensuing discussions. Educators can also exhibit biases and are advised by Sue et al. (2009, p. 1889) to recognize that they, too, are “cultural beings.” It would be useful for educators to have training to overcome their fears and become prepared to take advantage of challenging teaching moments.

Because dialogue on worldviews can result in emotional reactivity (Becker, 2009), techniques for a safe classroom should be included in educator training for content on spirituality. All social work students should feel safe to talk about their particular worldviews and discuss them in a mutually respectful manner. Holley and Steiner (2005) elucidated a number of characteristics of a safe social work classroom that include the following characteristics (p. 56): Ground rules for dialogue are set and held to by the educator and students. The atmosphere is nonjudgmental, and yet the class can feel comfortable

with conflict and controversy due to the guidelines that have been established. All feel respected and encouraged to join in, and students and educators are supportive of each other's opinions.

Table 5 provides a few suggestions for assignments and class exercises for curriculum content on worldviews:

Table 5
Ideas for Class Assignments

Purpose	Assignment/Exercise
Set the tone of dialogue in the class.	Set guidelines that the class will bracket ideas about being 'right' and about specific worldviews being 'true' (Gergen, 2009). Description will be utilized rather than defense or debate (McCarty, 2009). The educator commits to intervening when necessary to keep students feeling safe (Sue et al., 2009), nurtures curiosity and reflection, and encourages emerging rather than 'right' ideas (Shaw et al., 2012).
Prepare students to work with clients with a different worldview.	Students work in dyads with another student whose worldview differs from their own, holding to descriptive dialogue about topics given by the educator (Gergen, 2009). Fosters the skill of listening with openness and curiosity about the other (Swidler, 2008).
Confront stereotypes.	Have students read articles that refute stereotypes, such as Goodman's (2014) article that refutes the stereotype that atheists are immoral, showing that atheist students have high scores on moral qualities without identifying with any religion or spirituality. Discuss.
Examine similarities and differences in worldviews.	Have the class read a book like <i>God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions of the World and Why Their Differences Matter</i> by Prothero (2010) and discuss the goals and ideals of different worldviews (Shaw et al., 2012).
Help students learn to assess worldviews from a social work practice lens.	Devise case studies about client scenarios featuring clients who hold a variety of worldviews and have students discuss and evaluate for client strengths and treatment goals. Include scenarios in which social workers face dilemmas in which their worldviews clash with those of their agency or with social work values. Start with less threatening scenarios and move on to more difficult ones. Worldviews are evaluated for their positive or negative effects on client functioning and well-being according to guidelines provided by the NASW and CSWE.
Help students deal with the emotional and experiential aspects of discussion about worldviews.	Give an outside-class assignment in which students experience interaction with a group whose worldview differs significantly from their own (Hodge, 2006). To avoid students focusing on dogma, the goal is understanding the unfamiliar group's ideals and what they think constitutes a good life for individuals and communities.
Improve understanding about worldview plurality and different constructions of the same or similar terminology.	Hold a discussion about the meaning of words like 'spiritual,' 'transcendence,' 'higher power,' and 'meaning' within different worldviews (Holloway & Moss, 2010), including religious, spiritual, and naturalist frameworks.
Develop a broader sense of worldview plurality.	Have the class explore and discuss worldview typologies rather than a few specific religions. The purpose of this exercise is to broaden students' view from a focus on specific differences in dogma into a broader understanding of differences and similarities in human constructions of meaning (e.g. eastern religions, monotheistic religions, naturalist/atheist perspectives, New Age and alternative spiritualities, life philosophies vs. spiritualities).

Pertinent questions. A number of questions could be asked that would be useful in the development of dialogue: What kinds of verbiage can be developed that are descriptive rather than

justificatory? What techniques can educators utilize to ensure that students of all worldviews feel safe? What kinds of dialogic techniques can be utilized that will challenge students to examine their biases and reactivity in relation to worldviews different from their own? What kinds of dialogic techniques do students need to learn to effectively talk about worldviews with their clients? How can both commonalities and differences be acknowledged? How can conflicts of values—such as between atheists and the religious, between social work values and religious values—be effectively discussed? How can educators find a balance between respect for diversity and the critical examination of ideas?

Suggested training for educators. Participants observed that educators seemed uncomfortable at times with the subject of spirituality, especially when there was a clash of worldviews. This is consistent with other studies that find educators afraid of offending students and often feeling ill-equipped to handle the subject of spirituality (Barker, S.L., 2008; Bing & Talmadge, 2008; Shaw et al., 2012). Participants of this study also found educators unprepared and thought they needed training in order to effectively lead the class in content on spirituality and worldviews.

Educators can experience their own discomfort, justificatory stances, and emotional reactivity in the classroom. Shaw et al. (2012) suggest that educators need to be aware of and learn to manage their biases and reactivity about worldviews and learn to deliberately maintain an inclusive and nonjudgmental environment in the classroom. Training for educators in these areas seems to be as important as the need to develop appropriate coursework content about worldviews because educators who are uncomfortable and whose biases and stereotypes come to the forefront can inhibit learning opportunities for students.

Focus group participants in Sue et al.'s (2009) study on difficult dialogues about race found that the most important element for the creation of effective discussions is the educator's preparedness to lead difficult discussions. The study found that effective dialogue has to do with the ability of educators to address biases, manage their own biases and assumptions, validate individual experiences, utilize skills and techniques to manage difficult dialogue, and move through discomfort to achieve the goals of the discussion. Skills and techniques that have been developed for difficult dialogues on race could be adapted for difficult dialogues on worldviews.

Constructivist teaching methods are particularly useful for teaching about constructed phenomena with their focus on the mutual construction of meaning between educators and students (McAuliffe, 2011). Constructivist methods are well suited for creating nonjudgmental environments for learning about worldviews that foster mutual understanding (Watts, 2011). Educators who will teach about spirituality and worldviews would benefit from specific training on teaching methods that can create safe spaces for dialogue that also challenge assumptions and biases.

From the input provided by participants of this study and from the literature, it is recommended that educators who will teach curriculum content on spirituality should receive training that includes: (a) knowledge about the kinds of worldviews that exist, including atheist worldviews; (b) an understanding of currently understood biological, psychological, and sociocultural underpinnings for human spirituality; (c) principles for creating an affirming and inclusive environment for all students; (d) specific skills and techniques to prepare them to lead challenging yet respectful dialogue in the classroom, including the ability to intervene to maintain civil and appropriate dialogue; (e) preparation to handle emotional reactivity, defensiveness, and conflicts that may arise; (f) material to help educators manage their own and their students' personal biases, assumptions, fear, and reactivity; and (g) guidance for the creation of assignments that are relevant to the purpose of teaching social work students how to address issues about religion and spirituality with their clients.

Educators need to know how to set up a safe classroom for discussions (Holley & Steiner, 2009). They need to be ready to set parameters for discussions that include acknowledgement that some challenging discussions may ensue, guidelines for effective dialogue that includes setting aside debate in order to become open to understanding the other, and fostering curiosity and understanding. If the content is effective, training for educators should counter educator's perception of being ill-equipped or afraid to handle curriculum content on worldviews.

Pertinent questions to consider about training for educators include: What kind of knowledge do educators need to be able to provide training on worldviews? What specific skills and competencies do they need to include in coursework to adequately prepare their students for practice in the area of

worldviews? What kind of direction do educators need to provide appropriate, effective assignments? What kind of training do educators need to prepare them to lead difficult dialogues?

Summary. This section provided suggestions for curriculum content on spirituality that feature the need to move into a more professional and academic focus on spirituality as it relates to client well-being and functioning. These suggestions are meant to help create a curricular model that educators can utilize to ensure that curriculum content on spirituality and worldviews is academically appropriate, safe, and challenging, resulting in social work students becoming equipped to handle issues of spirituality and worldviews in practice.

It is suggested that educators should approach worldviews from a constructivist theoretical perspective using constructivist teaching methods in order to provide a conceptual framework that focuses on academic and professional standards for the preparation of social work students for practice in the area of spirituality and worldviews. Educators should know how to set up settings in which difficult dialogues on worldviews can be conducted using dialogic techniques developed for classroom material on spirituality and worldviews.

Curriculum content on spirituality and worldviews should provide students with a sense of the plurality of worldviews that can be encountered that range from specific religious framework to individual spiritualities to naturalist worldviews. The term ‘worldview’ is proposed as a more useful term for curriculum content on spirituality because it is inclusive of religious and spiritual beliefs as well as atheist and other naturalist life philosophies. Participants observed that classroom discussions can be negatively affected by emotional reactivity and the presence of biases, stereotypes, and assumptions on the part of both students and educators. The development of dialogic techniques geared towards challenging and informing dialogue about worldviews would be helpful to prepare students for engagement with clients whose worldviews may differ from theirs. It appears that educators who will be teaching worldview content would benefit from specific training to prepare them to provide effective classroom content on spirituality and worldviews.

Implications for Policy in Curriculum Content on Spirituality

The CSWE (2015) and NASW (2007) provide general guidelines such as empowerment of the individual and addressing worldviews from the framework of the client's own formulation of spirituality. However, reports from participants of this study and the literature indicate that guidelines for practice in the area of worldviews have not been applied consistently in curriculum content on spirituality, with the result that students often feel they have not been adequately trained to actually address issues about worldviews in practice. It would be helpful to develop a curricular model for content on spirituality and worldviews that educators can use. This model could contain guidelines for the knowledge and skills social work students need; suggestions for helping students confront biases and stereotypes; and dialogic techniques that can be utilized in class to help students learn to have effective dialogue with those whose worldviews are different.

There seem to be barriers to the development of academically and professionally sound guidelines for curriculum content that are somewhat unique to the discussion of human spirituality. These include a tendency for the subject to produce some emotional reactivity (Becker, 2009); a deference that is given to religious and spiritual worldviews that can inhibit open dialogue and critical examination about them (Dawkins, 2004; Paley, 2010); the presence of biases and assumptions that are difficult for students and educators to manage and discuss; and some fear of the topic on the part of both students and educators (Bing & Talmadge, 2008).

The need for effective dialogue seems to be a foundational issue for curriculum content on spirituality and worldviews. Research on interracial dialogue has provided decades of information about effective communication methods that can be adapted for use in social work education on spirituality. According to Sue et al. (2009), the success of difficult dialogues in the classroom depends in large part on the preparedness of the educator. It would seem useful for dialogic techniques to be developed for curriculum content on spirituality and for educators who will be teaching content on spirituality to receive training in these techniques.

One suggestion for policy is that a constructivist theoretical framework for teaching about spirituality and worldviews should be used to ground curriculum content on worldviews with the goal of providing students with the tools they need for practice in the area of worldviews. Constructivist teaching methods are considered particularly appropriate for teaching about spirituality and worldviews. The mystical or supernatural aspects of worldviews should be addressed as cultural phenomena. There is a need to appreciate and respect differing beliefs and cultures, but curriculum content does not have to endorse or contest the reality of mystical phenomena to effectively address spirituality and worldviews.

A CSWE task force on curriculum content on worldviews could provide direction about what kind of academically sound knowledge base and appropriate practice skills are needed by students to prepare them for practice in worldviews. Any knowledge base about a constructed phenomenon like spirituality and worldviews will be constantly evolving and changing. The issues of managing biases and stereotypes and addressing potential clashes between agency or social work practice values and religious values should be addressed. It seems essential that consistent material should be included in the curriculum that helps students learn to interact with others who hold worldviews that are different from their own and that classroom content includes the experience of working through difficult dialogues. Using constructivist teaching methods that provide experiential training can help social work students prepare for actual fieldwork in the area of spirituality and worldviews.

It would be useful for a Council on Social Work Education task force to develop broad, consistent requirements for coursework on spirituality and worldviews. Formulating guidelines for consistent content would ensure that students who take these courses have certain knowledge and skills and are adequately trained for practice in the area of spirituality and worldviews. These requirements would take into account: (a) the need to address emotional reactivity and social proscriptions against critical evaluation of worldviews; (b) the need to include and normalize discussion of alternative spiritualities and atheist worldviews; (c) the need for training for educators, and (d) the need to normalize discussion of difficult topics in a manner that is effective for preparing social work students for practice in the area of spirituality and worldviews.

Questions for consideration by the task force include: What is the best way to conceptualize spirituality for the curriculum? How would this conceptualization direct content for the curriculum? How can basic NASW and CSWE guidelines about worldviews be fleshed out to create specific guidelines for curriculum content on spirituality? What do social work students need to learn about worldviews? What knowledge and skills do students need to become professionally competent to address worldviews in practice? How can language and content meet the need to be inclusive?

Recommendations for Further Research

This research project left a number of unanswered questions for further research. How can inclusive language and content be developed for curriculum content on spirituality? On a practical level, what do social work students need to learn from the curriculum to become prepared to manage issues about spirituality and worldviews in practice? Why do educators fear the topic of worldviews and how can they be trained to become effective leaders in the journey of their students on this topic? What are social work educators across the United States actually teaching about worldviews? What are their thoughts about current curriculum content on worldviews and what direction it should take? What can American social work education learn about teaching worldviews from social work programs in other nations? What techniques can be developed for more effective dialogue about worldviews that is challenging and yet feels safe for all students?

Research involving educators who have taught or are interested in teaching content on spirituality would be useful. Educators report some discomfort and feelings of being unprepared to handle the subject of spirituality (Barker, S.L., 2008; Shaw et al., 2012). Their discomfort and unpreparedness was evident in some of the experiences of participants of this study. Research using focus groups, interviews, and open-ended surveys could provide better understanding about what educators need to handle their discomfort and unpreparedness for curriculum content on spirituality. Other research projects could seek data about atheist social work educators' perspectives on spirituality and their experience of teaching worldview content as an atheist instructor.

A systematic review of current syllabi for courses on spirituality could provide information about what material is actually being taught at present. Syllabi could be examined to identify the strengths and weaknesses in current coursework. The literature contains many decades of recommendations for coursework on spirituality and worldviews that can be investigated to create guidelines for curriculum content on spirituality and worldviews. A meta-analysis of these recommendations would be useful to aid in the project of drawing up guidelines for curriculum content on spirituality.

There seems to be a need to create more inclusive content and language for curriculum content on spirituality that takes into account the great variety of worldviews and avoids inherent assumptions that certain kinds of worldviews are normative. Curriculum content on worldviews should feel inclusive and welcoming for all students. Focus groups of students and educators who hold a variety of worldviews and cultural perspectives could discuss the matter of developing inclusive language and content for curriculum content on spirituality. Research could be conducted with both social work students and educators to bring up suggestions for alternatives to verbiage and content that focuses on religious and other supernatural frameworks.

An important issue for curriculum content on worldviews is that of difficult dialogues on spirituality. In order to manage the issue of worldviews in practice, it seems logical that students need to have opportunities to learn to manage difference and conflicts in the classroom. Research could be conducted to investigate how and why students can feel offended. Interviews and focus groups could provide information on the mechanisms that can cause individuals to feel threatened in the classroom.

Dialogic techniques have already been developed for difficult dialogues around race, class, and culture that can be studied and adapted for dialogue on spirituality. Various techniques for difficult dialogue can be utilized in focus groups to determine what techniques are the most effective. Research could test out the use of various frameworks for inter-worldview discussions to investigate what kinds of conceptual frameworks and verbiage will help everyone feel comfortable and yet remain open to intellectually challenging dialogue.

Conclusion

Per participant responses and the literature, curriculum content on spirituality does not have a consistent focus on its goal of preparing social work students with the knowledge and skills to practice with real clients in the area of spirituality and worldviews. Students are reporting they are not feeling prepared to handle worldviews with real clients in practice. Some of the issues that seem to be contributing to this lack of focus on the task of student preparation include fears and cultural proscriptions that make it difficult to talk about differing worldviews; the possibility of defense and emotional reactivity; biases and stereotypes about those who hold worldviews that are different from their own; challenges in balancing sensitivity and appreciation for diversity with the need for critical dialogue about worldview issues; and a lack of consensus about what students need to know and how to teach them.

How can curriculum content on spirituality accomplish the task of producing social workers who are prepared for practice with spirituality and worldviews? First of all, there is a need for a primary focus on the professional requirement of social work students to acquire the knowledge and practice tools they need. Curriculum content should be aware of and answer the need to confront fears, cultural proscriptions, and biases. Curriculum content should be inclusive not only of religious belief systems, but also nontraditional spiritualities and atheist perspectives. Perhaps the wording of a course should contain the word ‘worldview’ instead of ‘spirituality’ to reflect the growing number of atheist and other nonreligious people in the world.

If educators approach worldviews as constructions and supernatural elements of spirituality as cultural phenomena, a safe environment can be promoted in which students and educators leave off defensive positions about the veracity or truth of various worldviews (McCarty, 2009). Spiritualities and worldviews are evaluated from the standpoint of their relationship to practice with clients and an atmosphere of curiosity and understanding is fostered. Students need to have the experience of having dialogue with others whose worldviews are different from their own in order to be prepared to work with clients having different worldviews.

One way to assess curriculum needs is to envision what it would look like to encounter a group of social work students who have completed an effective and challenging course on spirituality and worldviews, and imagine the skills they would have and the tools they would have acquired: These students will be familiar with and understand NASW and CSWE standards for practice with spirituality and worldviews and know how to view spirituality and worldview through a social work practice lens. They will have gone through specific exercises that provided them with experience in evaluating case studies. They will have had assignments and experiential exercises that helped them understand and confront their own biases and stereotypes. This group of students will have a basic knowledge about spirituality typologies and have a sense of the plurality of worldviews that range from ones they are familiar with to ones that are very different and perhaps even threatening or repugnant to them. The atheist students will have gained understanding about how religious beliefs are possible, and the religious and spiritual students will have an understanding about atheist people and their worldviews. These students will have gone through training that has provided them with the skills to hold effective dialogues with each other using curiosity, appreciation, and a desire to understand the other that have prepared them to have effective dialogue with clients whose worldviews differ from theirs. They are now competent for effective practice in the area of spirituality and worldviews.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT INVITATION

Dear Participant,

My name is Jo Fjelstrom. I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University in the Social Work Department. We are conducting a research study about the thoughts and experiences of social work students and professors who identify as atheist (naturalist, agnostic, skeptic, secular humanist, nontheist, etc.). The reason for the study is that material on spirituality is increasingly required in the social work curriculum. So far, atheist perspectives have not been included in the dialogue on spirituality in social work education. Hence, we are seeking participants who can provide information about atheist perspectives and thoughts about spirituality.

Laurie Carlson, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the School of Education, is the Principal Investigator, and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

To participate in this research, you will answer questions via email about your experience and perspectives about spirituality. The questions are open-ended and broad, leaving you to answer with material you feel is pertinent. Your time commitment for this research can be as brief as 20 minutes or as involved as you wish. Of course this is voluntary, and you can stop participation at any time without penalty.

I will keep emails in an encrypted file in my encrypted laptop during the study, and the emails themselves will be deleted at the end of the study. When we share the research with others in my dissertation or future publications, there will be no identifying information.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact me at jfjelstrom@hotmail.com. I am the investigator who will be conducting the data collection. You can also contact Laurie Carlson, Ph.D., at laurie.carlson@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu. There are no known risks associated with this research, but talking

about world views can be uncomfortable or bring up issues. If so, let me know and I will provide you with some resources for assistance.

There is no direct benefit to you as a participant, but naturalist voices have been left out of the dialogue at present and I am expecting the knowledge you provide will benefit the social work curriculum. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Jo Fjelstrom, MSW

Doctoral Student

Co-Principal Investigator

Laurie Carlson, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Principal Investigator

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study. The social work curriculum has increasingly included material on religion and spirituality with very little information about those who hold atheist (naturalist, skeptic, nontheist, secular, etc.) worldviews. This research is designed to gain information about the experiences and perspectives of atheist social work students.

Please answer the following demographic questions:

Which university are you affiliated with?

If a student, are you:

___ Undergraduate ___ MSW level ___ PhD level

___ International ___ US

Gender:

Racial identity:

Religious or worldview upbringing, if any:

Your current worldview identity (ex: atheist, naturalist):

The following is a list of open-ended questions that are meant to provide an idea of the kind of information we are seeking. Please feel free to provide whatever you wish to have known about your views on spirituality and your thoughts about how spirituality is currently dealt with in the social work curriculum. If you disagree with the terminology we have used, please feel free to comment on that.

- 1. How do you perceive the idea of spirituality?*
- 2. Describe your experience with religion and/or spirituality. How has it affected your life?*
- 3. Do you relate to the idea of spirituality personally or consider yourself a spiritual person in some way? Why or why not?*
- 4. If you once had a religious or theist belief system, why or how did that change?*

5. Has your atheism provided any particular challenges for you? To what extent are you open with others about your worldview?

6. What has been your experience of spirituality being presented in the social work curriculum? Has atheism been addressed in your classes?

7. What have you seen as helpful or problematic about how spirituality is presented in the social work curriculum? How do you think social work educators should handle the topic of spirituality?

Please feel free to make comments on anything you think is pertinent. Your participation can be as brief or as involved as you like. My email is jfjelstrom@hotmail.com. I work Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays and will not be able to reply immediately during working hours on those days.

Thank you for your participation. It is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jo Fjelstrom, LCSW, PhD candidate