

Spirituality and Religion in the Lives of Runaway and Homeless Youth: Coping with Adversity

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Abstract:

This qualitative study, part of a larger study of resiliency, explores the impact of spirituality on runaway and/or homeless youth. Interviews with 19 former runaway and homeless youth were analyzed to explore their experience of spirituality as they coped with the adversity in their lives. Five themes related to spirituality emerged: a belief in divine intervention; having a personal relationship with a nonjudgmental higher power; use of prayer; participation in traditional and nontraditional religious practices; and finding meaning and purpose in life, including a desire to “give back” to their community. Implications for social work practice and research are addressed.

Keywords: Spirituality, runaway and homeless youth, resiliency, divine intervention

Article:

A focus on spirituality has emerged as a substantive focus of interest in the field of social work in recent years. While this shift has been reflected in current social work education curricula and research, the use of spirituality as a therapeutic tool is actually catching up to the addiction community’s reliance on spirituality as a core concept for harnessing recovery in Twelve-Step recovery programs. In this paper spirituality is explored through the multiple voices of a group of young adults who were runaway and/or homeless as adolescents, in order to understand the role and potential impact that spirituality and its correlate religion may have had in helping them cope with the adversity that they faced during that time.

A leading social work researcher in the area of spirituality suggests that spirituality is a “human quest for personal meaning, mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and, for some, God” (Canda, 1988, p. 243). In more recent work, he further states that spirituality can be expressed “through participation in religious institutions or traditions ... or through philosophical views . . .” (Canda, Nakashima, Burgess, & Russell, 1999, iv). Other scholars have described the presence of spiritual beliefs and associated religious practices as a source of potential healing that can provide a sense of connectedness to self, others and/or a larger meaning or purpose (Shuler, Gelberg, & Brown, 1994), a way of providing protection and coping with the trials of everyday life (Feinstein, 1997; Haight, 1998), and a tool in the clinical setting for healing emotional wounds (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993). In fact, these scholars reinforce the work of resiliency researchers who suggest that spirituality may play a role in the development of resiliency (Werner & Smith, 1992; Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001).

Spirituality has been closely associated with religion, described as “the external expression of faith ... comprised of beliefs, ethical codes, and worship practices” (Joseph, 1988, p. 244). Bullis (1996) suggests that religion appears to be focused on the outward manifestations of spiritual beliefs while the concept of spirituality appears to be a more internal process that can include an immediate connection to a Higher Power that occurs on an intensely personalized basis. While for many people, the support and nurturance that is often associated with spiritual practice can be found within an organized spiritual community such as at a church, mosque, or synagogue, others may reject the confines of traditional religion for a more non-traditional expression of beliefs. For the purposes of this paper, spirituality will refer to the belief systems that allow the participants in this

study to develop a relationship with a Higher Power that most of them have labeled “God,” attitudes towards and meaning-making of experiences, worship attendance and the various religious practices including prayer that have provided an outlet for their beliefs.

SPIRITUALITY AND ADOLESCENTS

Spirituality has been a focal point in studies of specific adolescent populations who have experienced particular challenges. These studies include youth who are dealing with loss and dying (Saunders, 1999; Early, 1998); substance abuse problems (Mason & Collision, 1995; Simons, 1992); and cult involvement (Wheeler, Wood, & Hatch, 1988), as well as with adolescents who are from traditionally oppressed populations such as African-American (Carroll, 2000; Chase, 2001; Haight, 1998; Logan, 1996; Allen-Meares, 1989) and Native American youth (Graham, 2001; Golnick, 2000; Sanchez-Way & Johnson, 2000). Additionally, researchers are exploring the protective factors that spiritual practices and beliefs may provide in reducing at-risk behaviors (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, & Jones, 1997) including violence (Rayburn & Richmond, 2001; Wauters & Moser, 2000; Meyer & Laussell, 1996), delinquency (Benda, 1995), and sexual and health compromising activities (Holder, Durant, Harris, Daniel, Obeidallah, & Goodman, 2000; Wallace & Williams, 1997).

Theorists have noted that the developmental changes that occur in adolescence allow youth to begin to think about spirituality differently than they did as children. Drawing from Piaget, Kohler, Erikson, and Fowler (1981) describes a stage of spirituality development, synthetic-conventional faith, which is often achieved in adolescence when there is an intellectual stage of development that lends itself to greater abstract thought. At this stage esoteric questions can be addressed such as wondering about the meaning of life. This development may cause a shift in the ability of adolescents to perceive grief and loss, experience spiritual connection, and reframe their experiences, which may allow them to perceive their lives with more objectivity. Fowler also asserts that as a result of the development of synthetic-conventional faith, “the commitment to God and the correlated self-image may exert a powerful ordering on a youth’s identity and values outlook” (p. 154). Adolescents tend to comprehend the notion of God as a powerful force that is “located externally to the self” (p. 154). Thus, the construct of God can be an important mitigating force for an adolescent who is lacking an authority figure to inculcate values and societal-endorsed behaviors as well as function as a source of identification. This is especially relevant for troubled adolescents whose primary frame of reference may be their dysfunctional families or peers and adults who engage in deviant behaviors and encourage them to do the same.

One such group of young people who are particularly vulnerable to many of the issues cited above is runaway and homeless youth, young people who are homeless and unaccompanied by an adult. These young people have commonly experienced abuse, loss, substance abuse, violence, and problems with both mental and physical health both in their own lives as well as in their family histories (Boesky, Toro, & Wright, 1995; Cauce, Paradise, Ginzler, Embry, Morgan, Lohr, & Wagner, 2000; Greene & Ringwalt, 1997; Kipke, O’Conner, Palmer, & Mac-Kenzie, 1995; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). In their efforts to escape from painful home situations, many face worse dangers and terrors on the street, often through their own self-destructive behaviors. The serious social challenge that runaway and homeless youth have presented has been documented for the past 30 years. According to the Institute for Health Policy Studies (1995), approximately 300,000 young people are homeless each year. In 1995, an estimated 2.8 million youth reported a runaway experience during the past year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995), and the U.S. Conference of Mayors (1998) found that unaccompanied youth account for 3% of the urban homeless population. Whitbeck and Simon (1990) estimate that one child in eight will run away prior to age 18, and 40% of them do not return to the same living situation they had before running away. The reasons youth run away vary, with many prematurely leaving their homes due to family conflict, abuse, and trauma; economic problems; and residential instability associated with leaving foster care or other institutions (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999; Zide & Cherry, 1992).

While research on youth homelessness has documented reasons youth leave home prematurely and the high-risk conditions they face while homeless, there has been little focus on protective factors among this population that may contribute to youth being able to survive, transcend their dangerous circumstances, and move their lives

into positive directions. This ability to transcend adversity is referred to as resiliency (Walsh, 1998). In a recent study of runaway and homeless youth (Williams et al., 2001) behaviors that were identified in more resilient youth included an ability to find a sense of meaning and purpose in life and a spiritual connection to a Higher Power. Increasingly, there is a focus on resiliency and adaptation in the literature, and researchers have begun to recognize spirituality as a factor in helping survivors of trauma face adversity (Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Anderson, 1997). Given the adversity and even trauma that many runaway and homeless youth face, some may find significant comfort and strength from a deepening sense of spirituality.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role spirituality may play in helping runaway and homeless youth cope with and even transcend their difficult circumstances. This study is an effort to define, understand, and develop empirical evidence for the impact of spirituality and its potential for healing trauma and shifting negative behavioral trajectories among this population. The research questions to be addressed are:

1. What is the experience of spirituality in the lives of runaway and homeless youth?
2. What impact does spirituality have on their ability to survive and transcend their personal circumstances?

Methodology

This exploratory, qualitative study is part of a larger study of resilience among homeless and runaway youth, utilizing a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A qualitative design facilitates understanding of an experience or phenomenon from the perspectives of the individuals who have lived it. Thus, the participants' words are used to convey the multitude of meanings that individuals attribute to their experience. The original research question was: "How do formerly runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of leaving home, living in high-risk environments, and engaging in dangerous behaviors, to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood?" Results from the original study, which focused on personal strengths and the role of professional and nonprofessional helpers in this transition have been published elsewhere (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nakerud, 2000; Kurtz, Jarvis, Lindsey, & Nackerud, 1999). The theme of spirituality emerged from the original study as a finding related to the personal strengths and resources that young people believed contributed significantly to their success. Similarly, in a comparative case study of five of the original research participants that examined factors associated with resiliency (Williams et al., 2001), spirituality again emerged as important. Thus, the present study is a further investigation into these earlier findings.

Data Collection

Data used in the present study were collected in two waves. As a result of the analysis of the data from the original study, researchers became interested in following up on some of the findings that had emerged, and thus initiated a second wave of interviews with an additional seven respondents. In both waves of data collection, interviews were conducted in places convenient to research participants, including their homes, youth shelters, or group homes. Participants were paid \$30 each, and all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

First Wave Data Collection

During the first wave, 12 young adults who had either run away or otherwise been homeless prior to the age of 18 were interviewed. Staff at shelters and group homes in two North Carolina cities and three Georgia towns identified research participants. Criteria for participation in the study were that participants had stayed in a youth shelter, group home, or other alternative living arrangement as adolescents, but not within the past two years. Prior to the interviews, researchers reviewed the purpose of the study, verified that participants were cooperating voluntarily, informed participants of their right to withdraw from participation at any time, and answered any questions participants had.

All four members of the research team conducted semi-structured interviews that lasted from 50 to 90 minutes each. Using the grounded theory approach, researchers modified the original interview guide as data analysis

proceeded during the first wave of data collection. The interview guide included the following major subject areas: demographic information; difficult times the young people had experienced; how they had made it through those times; turning points in their lives; current situation; definition of success; and future hopes and plans.

Second Wave Data Collection

During the second round of data collection, researchers recruited an additional 7 respondents through staff at shelter programs, in waiting rooms in social services offices, and in a halfway house operated by the prison system in Georgia. The same participation criteria from the first phase of the study were used, except that we were particularly interested in interviewing some participants who had not been very successful in turning their lives around. We decided to interview as many of the first phase respondents as possible to gain additional insight into how they were doing one year or more after the first interview, but we were only able to secure participation of 4 of the original 12 respondents. The interview guide for the second wave included both questions from the original study as well as additional questions related to specific areas researchers wanted to explore further, including the role of spirituality in the respondents' transition out of homelessness. The new questions were asked after the original questions to allow respondents the opportunity to bring up the topics we had not originally inquired about spontaneously. If they did not bring these topics up, the additional questions were asked.

Sample

Of the 19 participants, 8 were male and 11 were female; 6 were African American, one Cuban American, and 12 were Caucasian. Participants ranged in age from 18-25 at the time of the interview. Ten of the respondents were working and not in school, three were enrolled in a postsecondary education program, one was enrolled in high school, and five were neither working nor in school. Twelve participants had earned either a high school diploma or a General Education Degree (GED), and seven had completed some postsecondary school. The age at which respondents left home for the first time ranged from 12 to 17 years. Eight respondents reported staying only or primarily in youth shelters and six reported moving among friends' houses, sleeping on the streets, or camping out. Four respondents had stayed in a wide variety of places including shelters, friends' homes, and outdoors. The length of time they reported being homeless ranged from two weeks to several years, and the number of times they left home ranged from one to four. Their current living situations were as follows: eight were living independently; five were living with parents, foster parents, or other relatives; two were living in a substance abuse recovery program; and two were living in a half-way house for non-dangerous offenders. It was not clear where two of the participants were living at the time of the interview. One of the original respondents who was living independently at the time of the first interview, was living in a diversion center during the second interview.

Data Analysis

Data from the first wave of interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method which involves analyzing data as it is collected and using preliminary findings to shape future interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were initially used to discover factors, ideas and experiences that the young people perceived to have been important in their lives. A "check-coding" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) process was used to clarify definitions and enhance inter-coder agreement. All four researchers reviewed the first six interview transcripts to identify initial categories that seemed to encompass the experiences participants described. After this initial review, all four researchers re-analyzed a single transcript using the categories that had emerged from open coding and clarified category definitions and descriptions to enhance inter-coder agreement. Then two team members re-analyzed each of the other 11 transcripts, using the initial categories that emerged from the open coding. Researchers who analyzed the same transcripts worked closely to continue the process of clarification and enhancement of inter-coder agreement. Additional categories were added, and existing categories were modified as analysis proceeded. Once the transcripts had been coded and analyzed, the Non-numerical Unstructured Data * Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD*IST) qualitative data analysis program (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 1997) was used to sort specific transcribed segments to the conceptual categories that had emerged from the coding process.

NUD*IST allows the researcher to import and code textual data; edit text; retrieve, review and recode coded data; and search for combinations of words in the text or patterns (QSR, 2004). It was from this data analysis process that the theme of spirituality emerged as important to the young people's successful transition out of homelessness.

Categories of findings from the first wave of data that were relevant to spirituality were used to analyze the second wave data (see Figure 1). However, researchers remained open to the possibility that new information would emerge that might require modification of the original categories, and, indeed that occurred (see Figure 2). Researchers went through an iterative process similar to that of the first wave data analysis to code and recode the second wave data.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of spirituality in helping runaway and homeless youth survive and transcend their experiences of homelessness. Although researchers had not asked specific questions related to religious and spiritual influences during the first wave of interviews, a number of the participants spontaneously reported ways that spirituality had assisted them as they attempted to get their lives back together. They described various religious and spiritual experiences and practices they deemed quite important in helping them deal with crises and move forward with their lives. In the second wave of interviews, specific questions about possible religious and spiritual influences were added to the interview guide. Of the 19 participants, 15 spoke about their religious and spiritual experiences and beliefs. The five themes that emerged are shown in Figure 2, which, when compared with Figure 1, shows that two of the original categories were retained (1 and 2), two of the original categories were merged into one (2 and 4), two additional categories were added, based on the second wave data.

FIGURE 1. Spirituality Themes from First Wave Data

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1. A belief in divine intervention
 2. An active relationship with a Higher Power including God
 3. The role of prayer
 4. A sense of receiving unconditional love and acceptance
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FIGURE 2. Elements of Spirituality that Facilitate Successful Transitions

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1. Divine intervention
 2. Having a personal relationship with a nonjudgmental Higher Power
 3. Use of prayer
 4. Participation in traditional and nontraditional religious practices
 5. Finding meaning and purpose in life
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Divine Intervention

About half of the participants reported that a Higher Power had directly intervened in their lives in varied but significant ways. Most of these participants strongly believed that a Higher Power, which they called God, had helped them in a time of utmost crisis. They spoke of having faith in the power of a divine relationship that allowed them to survive their ordeals. They testified that God was instrumental in enabling them to weather such crises as being near death, deciding whether to have an abortion, getting clean from drugs and alcohol, and reconciling with their families. For example, Sally (all names are pseudonyms), who experienced a life-threatening illness, stated:

I believe in Jesus. I believe in God. I believe that Jesus is the one who saved me, and He brought me back [from death], and He brought me back for a reason, because of the way [I was] living before then. It wasn't cutting it.

Like Sally, Tracey believed that God had intervened directly in her life and that God had a purpose for her staying alive.

I believe that if it wasn't for the Lord, my behind would be dead.... There have been so many times when I've used massive amounts of heroin, massive amounts of cocaine through intravenous use, when there have been times that I should have died.

In a slightly different vein, James believed that God's intervention in his life was to punish him:

Whenever you do wrong, fate or something's gonna bring it back to you. I figure that's why I have been locked up cause the Lord knows how much to punish me. Shouldn't do anything wrong if you don't want any wrong done to you.

Not all the participants believed that God had intervened directly in their lives. One interviewee in particular spoke with skepticism about this. Annie recalled, "I couldn't say that there's anything that He has done or He hasn't done." She went on to say that she does pray every day, and "I sometimes wonder if those prayers are ever going to be answered."

Personal Relationship with God or a Higher Power

Nineteen participants spoke either directly or indirectly about their relationship with a Higher Power. All but two referred to the Higher Power as "God" and "He." For the most part God was perceived to be outside or external to self and had a range of attributes such as a savior, a guide, and one who bestows love, hope, strength, forgiveness. However, along with this personification of God was a sense, by some, of being held accountable by a severe judge who meted out punishment for transgressions.

A personal relationship with God seemed to be related to feelings of closeness and support, as distinct from the concrete ways that constituted direct divine intervention in their lives. God was seen as a support when they felt little support from the people in their lives. Several participants believed that God had been instrumental in helping them set a new, healthier course for their lives. Ricardo, for example, emphasized, "The Lord came into my life. He told me that this ain't the right way to go, and I needed to straighten up.... I changed my attitude.... He just opened up my life." Sandy expressed it this way: "I ask God to make way for me." At the time of the interviews two participants were enrolled in Christian-based substance abuse treatment programs, and their statements reflected Christian teachings about their personal relationships with God. For example, Chase spoke adamantly and at great length that the single thing that was most helpful to him was:

the knowledge that I have a savior, a Lord and Savior, and that He died for me on the cross for my sins ... he's my grace and salvation.... I can see a new path that I'm making on my own through the help, of course, of our Father.

One important element of some participants' relationship with a Higher Power is that they did not experience a sense of judgment from that power. Add unlike James they did not experience God as inflicting punishment. Several participants had experienced judgmental religious attitudes as children and sought a God who is loving and accepting rather than judgmental and punitive. For instance, Kameka said:

I didn't necessarily believe in God that everybody else believes in, but I always believed in a Higher Power. And for me, just being able to say that I know I'm [here] because of something greater than myself. What it is, I have no idea, but just being able to pray to something, you know, just to say "Help me" to somebody.... And they ain't going to judge you, come down and slap you

Trisha had been educated for two years in a Christian school, which she claimed, "Left me with the feeling that I was being judged ... this hateful awful God looking down after me, and I didn't want that."

Carson and Frani were the only participants who specifically described God or religion as being within himself or herself rather than as an external entity. For instance, Frani expressed a belief in an inner sense of religion

when she said, “Religion is what you feel.” Similarly, Carson said, “I believe in God.... I believe God is all in your heart.” However, despite his heart-centered perception of God, Carson also felt that God was an external entity that held him accountable for his deeds: “I know what I have to do to prove my loyalty to the God. I know right from wrong and as long as I do what is right, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Role of Prayer

Most participants seemed to have a rather pragmatic relationship with God that manifested itself in turning to God, usually through prayer, when they had an important need to be met. When in desperate straits, they often turned to God with specific requests. After his father died, Jeremy remembers, “I just went totally downhill. I was living like a maggot smoking crack and snorting heroin.” Finally after one such episode, he said, “I ended up having to drive home.... I was praying to God that I’d get back home safely. And, God answered my prayer.” He contacted a minister friend who enrolled him in a rehabilitation treatment program the very next day.

James spoke about how he calls upon God when he is worried: “I’m not real religious. I’ve gotten real worried about something and prayed and asked God to help me through it. And He helped me, I guess.” Still others, such as Ricardo, prayed to “let Him know the things I need.... He helped me get a job.” Jessica spoke of God meeting her needs in a slightly different way when she said,

I think knowing that God is there for me. I know that if I pray to Him about something, I know He’s gonna be able to do what He can, whether He’s going to do something right then or He just does it one day.

Some participants talked about how prayer helped not only them, but also others in their lives. For instance, Jessica was in a crisis when her mother contracted breast cancer. She believed that prayer helped her mother survive and helped her (Jessica) cope with the situation. Similarly, Alicia related how her mother’s prayers had brought her a dream that convinced Alicia not to have an abortion. However, her son was born two months premature and had to have emergency surgery during which he suffered internal bleeding. Alicia recalled, “The doctors didn’t know why. They didn’t know where it was coming from.... Me and my mom just prayed and the bleeding stopped.... He’s my miracle baby. He’s God’s baby.”

All the young people who spoke of their Higher Power as God believed that prayer was the vehicle for direct communication. Some prayed daily and others on a sporadic basis when in need of help. Ricardo de-scribes how “I got down on my hands and knees to pray for the Lord to come into my life.” Others also expressed this sense of reverence, supplication, and putting oneself in God’s hands. The feeling of adoration at times seemed intertwined with opening one’s heart to God and letting God into one’s life. Ricardo calls this “giving your heart to the Lord.” In doing so, he seemed to be saying that, through his devotion, he was following a more righteous path, which was very different from his previously troubled path.

Participation in Traditional and Non-Traditional Religious Practices

A majority of the participants were raised in a Christian denomination, and most attended church as children. As they moved into adolescence many of them had stopped attending church or their church attendance had become irregular. Although some still thought that going to church was important, they expressed the belief that it was not necessary to go to church for them to be in relationship with a Higher Power. That is, they distinguished between personal faith and prayer and active participation or attendance at church. For instance, Jessica worked on Sundays and was not able to go to church, but she still held a firm belief in her relationship with God. Annie, who prays on a daily basis, did not go to church either. She claimed, “I don’t think that to have a close relationship with God you have to go to church.”

Trisha had been raised in a very strict Christian church and was not interested in any type of traditional religious practice. However, her substance abuse treatment program, which was based on Native American spiritual practices, was a critical factor in her recovery. She describes this process:

The treatment center ... was based around Native American spirituality and more like getting in touch with nature, in touch with earth. And the concept of spirituality instead of religion, that's what really made me open my eyes and see different things and got kind of interested in life again.

Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life

About half the interviewees believed that God or a Higher Power enabled them to emerge out of the depths of their traumatic circumstances to see that life is worth living. They believed that turning to or being drawn to God or a Higher Power had a dramatic influence on their turning away from the "wrong path" and "seeing a new path." Chase, who spoke of being on the "wrong path" and trying to kill himself, said, "I see that now, and I can see a new path through the help of Our Father. I guess He opened my eyes." Trisha told of how being exposed to Native American spiritual practices in her treatment program enabled her to "see how I was connected so I wasn't as isolated as I thought I was."

An integral part of this new found sense of self in relation to a Higher Power was gaining a fresh understanding of the meaning and purpose of life. Many of the participants' lives had revolved around surviving unhealthy family circumstances and adapting to living on the streets or in institutions. Their energies had been focused on finding ways to cope with the crises of daily living, and many of these survival mechanisms were maladaptive. As they began to free themselves from living in and reacting to crises and instability, they began to realize there was more to life. For example, Trisha, who had been raised in a turbulent family, had turned to drugs to cope with her chronic depression. In commenting on her exposure to Native American spirituality in her treatment program she said, "The concept of spirituality instead of religion. That's what really made me open my eyes and got me interested in life again." Tracey credited her survival to intervention by God. "I really think by the grace of God I am not dead. And that he has a purpose for me and that he is going to keep me here no matter how many times I try to kill myself." Through her many bouts with drug abuse, Tracey was grounded in the belief that, "It is by the grace of God that I am not dead. He has a purpose for me.... He has some kind of useful task for me down here...." She went on to say, "You are put on this earth to serve a mission for God."

Through their discovered connections with spirituality, some young people began to see their own strengths and the role they could play in contributing to the well being of others, as well as themselves, which gave new meaning to their lives. Trisha said, "the concept of helping others.... So it's like you're seeing this goodness multiply that's just so cool." Chase said,

I look forward to waking up every morning. I have meaning in my life. I didn't have meaning before.... Meaning is to live for God, to live a productive life in a Christian environment, to help others, and to help myself be a positive influence on others.

About half of the interviewees believed that God or a Higher Power provided them with a sense of purpose or an explanation for life. Carson illustrated this as he claimed, "You need God in your life. You need some type of explanation for what's going on with the world." Since Jesus came into Chase's life, he said, "I have meaning in my life. I didn't have a meaning before."

DISCUSSION

Formerly runaway and homeless youth, many of whom had rejected family and community connections, engaged in anti-social behaviors, and even rejected traditional religious practices, reported experiencing a sense of spiritual connectedness that seemed to play a significant role in their lives. For some, it appeared to even help them deal with the adversity that they confronted. Yet, although virtually all of the research participants were involved in numerous and varied intervention programs to help them address their many needs, very few spoke of conscious or planned attention given to using religious or spiritual practices as part of their treatment. Instead, most of them seem to have connected to a sense of spirituality in their lives completely independent of any professional help and often in spite of previous negative experiences with churches and traditional religion. This study has been an effort to further define, understand, and develop credibility for the impact of spirituality and its potential for healing trauma and shifting negative behavioral trajectories among runaway and/or

homeless youth.

For the young people in this study, their spirituality was typically manifested in a belief in a personal relationship with God or a Higher Power. This individualized relationship with God is especially significant in view of the fact that the participants in this study described lives that included a paucity of close relationships with positive authority and/or parental figures. It is interesting to note that participants consistently reported a belief in a God who is a keeper of values and the standard-bearer of conscience rather than merely a nurturing presence of unconditional acceptance and love. For example, prayer, the primary way the participants described engaging with God, was not viewed as a way out of trouble but as a way to maintain connection to an internalized and quite traditional value system. Thus, participants' spiritual connection with God may have become a substitute for parental guidance that had been lacking in their lives.

Spiritual development has been linked with deepening and expanding a person's values and perspectives creating a context for reframing adversity into an opportunity for personal growth and learning, a notion integrated into many spiritual traditions. This process of meaning making seemed to be especially present for the young people in the study who evidenced signs of being particularly resilient (Williams et al., 2001). In this previously published article, the authors described a comparative study of respondents who were judged to be more or less resilient, based on their ability to make meaning out of their adversity, sense of connection to others, and whether they saw themselves as a victim of circumstance or empowered to impact change in their lives. The young people who were judged to be more resilient had been able to hold on to a sense of hope despite huge obstacles and find reassurance and nurturance in their spiritual beliefs. Additionally, the more resilient young people were able to relate to the concept of a Higher Power as a healing, nurturing presence in their lives that appeared to nourish them in a way that their relationships with peers, family and helping professionals failed to do. The role of faith also seemed to play a key role for the more resilient young people as they reflected on experiencing a sense of divine intervention, a process of being rescued from the negative trajectory of their lives through negative events they were able to reframe as turning points.

Implications for Social Work Practice

It is particularly important for helping professionals to be cognizant of the possible presence and importance of spiritual beliefs in the lives of troubled adolescents such as runaway and homeless youth. It is important for social workers to both respect the meaning and power of spirituality in their client's belief systems and to be aware of how their own personal spiritual beliefs may intrude or join in the process. At its best, spirituality can provide a framework for humans to find forgive-ness for their foibles and can potentially lay a foundation for acceptance of self and others. When God is viewed as forgiving, compassionate and loving, then the believer can internalize those messages in a beneficial way for self and others. This process can be utilized as a powerful vehicle for transference, seen as key in many relationally-based psychotherapy models, which can transform a sense of need and dependency into an inner core of personal strength. Within this relationship, the individual is given a potentially reparative model from which to fashion new beliefs and behaviors. This can be a powerful tool for practitioners who are searching for a way to establish the trust so essential to using the therapeutic relationship as a source of healing. As evidenced in this study, spiritual beliefs were ever present in virtually all the respondents and were available for exploration when asked. These young people, who had lived their adolescences as rebels and outsiders, demonstrated that beneath their often-crusty surfaces, the spirituality that resides there makes them much more a part of the whole than separate. The young people in this study have much to teach social workers about how spirituality played a role in their adaptation to their troubled lives, and in some cases, foster an ability to transcend their adversity. The spiritual dimension provides a framework for hope and in helping people make meaning of the events of their lives.

Future Research

The findings of this study provide valuable information about the possible role spirituality may play in the lives and effective treatment of runaway and homeless youth. However, as a qualitative study, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Additional research is needed to explore the extent to which the experiences of these participants are similar or dissimilar to those of other youth who have run away or been homeless and the role

spirituality may play in their lives. Outcome studies of interventions that utilize some of these ideas in practice with run-away and homeless youth would be of great benefit in assessing the potential impact of such a focus on spiritual beliefs and practices on successful emergence from crisis into a more constructive lifestyle.

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