

# Spirituality in Social Work: A systematic review

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## Abstract

In recent decades, interest in spirituality within social work has grown, recognizing its importance for the holistic well-being of individuals and communities. Spirituality encompasses both religious aspects and dimensions such as purpose, connection (with oneself, others, and a broader reality), and emotional and psychological well-being. This conceptual diversity creates ambiguity and challenges within the profession, highlighting the need for greater clarity and consensus on its meaning. International researchers, both from theoretical and practical perspectives of social work, acknowledge the importance of integrating this dimension into professional practice and the training of future social workers. This study presents a systematic review of 62 recent articles on spirituality and social work, identifying two main approaches: those that view spirituality from a cognitive lens and those that approach it from an experiential perspective, which in some cases is religious. Additionally, some positions consider religion and spirituality nearly synonymous, while others see them as distinct realms with common elements. The article concludes by proposing a definition of spirituality applicable to social work, incorporating the key nuances identified.

**Keywords:** Spirituality; Religion; Resilience; Social Work; Well-being; Philosophy of mind.

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# La espiritualidad en el Trabajo Social: una revisión sistemática

## Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el interés por la espiritualidad en el Trabajo Social ha aumentado, reconociéndose su importancia para el bienestar integral de individuos y comunidades. La espiritualidad abarca no solo aspectos religiosos, sino también dimensiones como el propósito, la conexión (con uno mismo, con los otros y con alguna realidad más amplia) y el bienestar emocional y psicológico. Esta diversidad conceptual crea ambigüedad y desafíos en la profesión, subrayando la necesidad de mayor claridad y consenso sobre su significado. Investigadores internacionales, tanto con una mirada teórica como práctica del Trabajo Social, reconocen la importancia de integrar esta dimensión en la práctica profesional y la formación de futuros trabajadores sociales. Este estudio realiza una revisión sistemática de 62 artículos recientes sobre espiritualidad y Trabajo Social, identificando dos enfoques principales: los que se acercan a la espiritualidad con una mirada cognitiva y los que lo hacen con una mirada basada en la experiencia, que en algunos casos es religiosa. También se observan posturas que consideran la religión y la espiritualidad casi sinónimas y otras que las ven como ámbitos distintos con elementos comunes. El artículo concluye proponiendo una definición de espiritualidad aplicable al Trabajo Social que incluye los principales matices encontrados.

**Palabras clave:** Espiritualidad; Religión; Resiliencia; Trabajo Social; Bienestar; Filosofía del espíritu.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 3.1 Focus of the articles: training, practice or theory, 3.2 Relationship between spirituality and religion: RS versus R/S, 3.3 Approach to defining spirituality, 3.4 Concepts appearing in the definitions of spirituality, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographic references.

## 1. Introduction

Interest in the relationship between religion, spirituality, and Social Work has deep roots (Canda, 2021). A key milestone came in 1975 with the publication of the first issue of *Social Thought: Journal of Religion in the Social Services*, which marked the beginning of a growing academic interest in exploring these connections. This interest was solidified in 1989, when the Society for Spirituality and Social Work was founded to establish networks between academics and professionals interested in integrating spirituality and religion into Social Work.

Since then, awareness of the need to take a holistic view of the clients of Social Work has grown. In addition to promoting clients' active participation in their rehabilitation and integration, this approach recognizes that the intervention objectives must resonate with their sense of purpose and deeper aspects of their lives, with spirituality playing a key role (Crisp, 2008; 2020; Furness & Gilligan, 2010; Howe, 1999; Mathews, 2009; Virat & Verba, 2022).

Often expressed through specific forms of religiosity, spirituality should be incorporated into intervention programs. By bringing spirituality into Social Work, we may progress in understanding and promoting individual well-being.

Many studies in recent decades have advocated the benefits of integrating spirituality into the support processes of Social Work (Bullis, 1996; Canda, 1998; Coates et al., 2007; Furman & Chandy, 1994; Hodge, 2001; Mathews, 2009; Russel, 1998). This renewed interest is reflected in the transformation of the journal, which changed its name to *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, thereby explicitly integrating the term 'spirituality'.

Publications that explore the relationship between spirituality and Social Work begin by defining and delimiting both terms. Hodge (2017) describes how this relationship evolved from a classic approach that included spirituality in religion to a contemporary perspective that considers it an intrinsic human quality connected to the search for meaning. Spirituality is expressed in specific ways of experiencing spiritual aspects of life, which can be religious or non-religious.

Koenig (2008) offers a synthetic definition of religion, describing it as 'a system of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, communicate with or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God' (p. 11). Spirituality and religion have maintained a close cultural connection (Antón-Hurtado, 2022), which has led to some ambiguity around the term 'spirituality'. According to Martínez-Lozano (2012), this confusion owes to a dualistic view that separated matter and spirit, body and soul, and an inclination to approach spirituality exclusively from a religious perspective that conceptually weakened the term. The distinction between religiosity and spirituality primarily rests on the mediating role of institutions. Therefore, interest in the relationship between spirituality and Social Work includes

religious expression, rather than excluding it, recognizing that both religiosity and spirituality may provide valuable resources for social intervention.

Various sectors of Social Work acknowledge the benefits of incorporating spirituality into the professional support provided to clients.

For example, both Mercer (2006) and Adams (2009; 2019) note that professionals do not recognize the spiritual capacity of children and therefore pay little attention to their spiritual experiences, leading to what Fricker (2017) calls 'epistemic injustice'. The researchers provide evidence of spirituality's role in building identity, emotional well-being, and mental health in childhood. Along these same lines, Hyde (2008), the author of a benchmark study on children's spirituality, introduces the characteristic concept of 'felt sense', which springs from the immediate way children experience life. Building on this idea, Eade (2009; 2019) analyses how spirituality is linked to emotional well-being, arguing that too much introspection in childhood can be counterproductive. Therefore, a spirituality-focused approach focused on connecting with others and one's surroundings cultivates a more profound sense of well-being beyond immediate satisfaction. Finally, Mata-McMahon (2017) draws attention to the close link between children's spirituality and their sense of humor, asserting that both express joy, kindness, and imagination while helping build interpersonal relationships.

4 Other studies explore the protective role that spirituality plays for adolescents under challenging circumstances, such as domestic violence, immigration, and alcoholism (Benavides, 2012; Delva *et al.*, 2015; Jackson *et al.*, 2010). In her study on unaccompanied minors, Ní Raghallaigh (2011) claims that spirituality is a valuable resource for dealing with the challenges typical of this stage of life. She also argues that Social Work professionals must avoid taking a spiritually or religiously blind approach, as doing so could impose an excessively secular or rationalistic worldview, as previously warned by Gilligan and Furness (2006).

Research on Social Work and people with disabilities has revealed the spiritual resilience of some individuals living with chronic disabilities (Clarke & Cardman, 2002; Kaye & Raghavan, 2002). In this context, Martínez-Rivera *et al.* (2020) conducted an ethnographic study on people with disabilities in care homes that stresses the importance of considering the non-material needs of people with intellectual disabilities.

Focusing on the elderly, a group susceptible to spiritual matters, Gallardo-Peralta (2017) analyses the link between spirituality and quality of life by applying a scale to over 700 elderly Chilean people. She concludes that this relationship is key for older people to find a balance as they undergo the changes associated with aging. She also highlights the influence of congregational support on maintaining satisfying social relationships. In this vein, after reviewing several studies from a health and socio-educational perspective, Harrington (2016)

draws attention to the importance of conducting a proper spiritual evaluation in the final stage of life.

Finally, using spirituality to support immigrants helps social workers understand migratory experiences better, as George and Ellison (2015) explain. Specifically, they urge professionals to reflect on their spirituality and recommend that they take a collaborative approach focused on the immigrant client to build respectful and effective therapeutic relationships. Along these same lines, a case analysis conducted by Fanega-Valencia and Benavent-Vallès (2024) demonstrates the significance of the spiritual dimension in migratory experiences and how it evolves in immigrants' later settlement in the host society.

Other research stresses the value of incorporating spirituality so that professionals reflect on their spirituality and calls for them to receive training in spirituality and religious diversity (Belcher & Sarmiento, 2016; Canda, 2008; Crisp, 2008; Gilligan & Furness, 2006; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007).

The relationship between spirituality and Social Work is a complex subject of interest, as various authors have indicated (Crisp, 2020; Hodge, 2015; Mathews, 2009). This complexity is due to the lack of explicit agreement on a definition of spirituality and the problems connected with measuring it and determining the appropriate methods. To address this problem, Senreich (2013) proposed an inclusive definition intended for training social workers:

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)

This definition acknowledges the diversity of human experience and avoids reducing spirituality to a linear or uniform concept. In line with this perspective, Hodge (2017) emphasizes the importance of avoiding discrimination towards clients with conservative religious beliefs and promoting respect for diversity as a fundamental principle of Social Work values.

Nevertheless, although Senreich's (2013) definition offers a deep and theoretical understanding of spirituality, the practice of Social Work requires more specific and applicable approaches to guide effective interventions. Therefore, we propose moving towards a definition of spirituality incorporating the key elements identified in the most recent research on Social Work.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the definitions of the term 'spirituality' used in research on Social Work, with three primary objectives: 1) to classify the definitions used in these studies, 2) to evaluate the different categories of definitions according to variables found in the

research reviewed and 3) to propose a definition of spirituality that is useful both for professional practice and for future research on Social Work.

## 2. Methodology

This study aims to evaluate and interpret the academic literature through a systematic review (Sánchez-Meca, 2010). The methodology is based on the steps laid out in the PRISMA reporting guidelines (Sánchez-Serrano *et al.*, 2022). It includes: formulating the question addressed by the review, listing the high-impact bibliographic references according to defined eligibility criteria, collecting relevant data from the selected descriptors, and finally, conducting a content analysis focused on the definitions of spirituality found in the studies.

### Formulating the question addressed by the review

We pose the following question for the review to address: What is the most common type of definition of the term 'spirituality' in research on spirituality and Social Work?

We will analyze how spirituality is defined in these studies to understand better how it is integrated into professional practice and its impact on Social Work interventions. This includes examining whether the definitions emphasise religious, personal, or community aspects, or a combination.

The systematic review will identify common patterns and differences, providing a comprehensive perspective on how spirituality is conceptualized and applied in Social Work. These findings guide future research and practice, promoting a more consistent and effective incorporation of spirituality into Social Work interventions.

### Listing the bibliographic references and eligibility criteria

We used the EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) metasearch engine to perform a thorough and selective search of academic articles in March and April 2023. Known for its intuitive interface, EDS uses a single search box to access content from central databases, such as WoS and SCOPUS, as well as other sources of global academic literature. Gathering metadata from internal and external sources provides a pre-indexed service that streamlines the finding and selection of relevant articles.

In the first filtering stage, we selected peer-reviewed articles dealing with the concepts of 'spirituality' and 'Social Work' published between 2017 and 2023. This brought up 211 relevant articles.



In the second stage, we refined our criteria to focus exclusively on the professional field of Social Work. Excluding articles in non-specialized journals, such as those devoted to medicine and psychology, we limited our search to five key journals: *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work*, *The British Journal of Social Work*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Social Work*, and *Social Work in Health Care*. We thereby reduced the sample to 81 articles, most from the most specialized journal on spirituality and Social Work.

In the third stage, we reviewed the abstracts of the 81 articles and excluded those that did not show any explicit relationship between spirituality and Social Work. This left us with a total of 75.

Finally, we evaluated the definitions of 'spirituality' in the selected articles. We discarded 13 other studies for lacking any explicit definition of the term, resulting in 62 articles for our detailed analysis.

## Codifying the articles for the content analysis

We codified the articles in three stages using a systematic, transparent, and replicable approach.

First, we considered the articles' research objectives, which gave us three groups: 1) studies on the practice of Social Work, 2) articles on the training of social workers, and 3) theoretical research on the discipline of Social Work.

Second, we classified the articles based on how they address the concepts of religion and spirituality. Those who consider religion and spirituality almost synonymous, interchangeable, or potentially inseparable concepts (RS) were distinguished from those who view them as two distinct concepts that should be dealt with separately despite sharing some features (R/S).

Finally, we applied our three pre-established categories (well-being, experience, and religiosity) to identify definitions of 'spirituality' in the selected articles. This enabled us to perform a thorough and comparative analysis of the different perspectives on spirituality in Social Work.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Focus of the articles: training, practice, or theory

Our analysis reveals that a significant proportion (28.3%) of the articles concentrate on training social workers. These studies explore and examine the different approaches, methodologies, and practices used in the professional training of social workers concerning

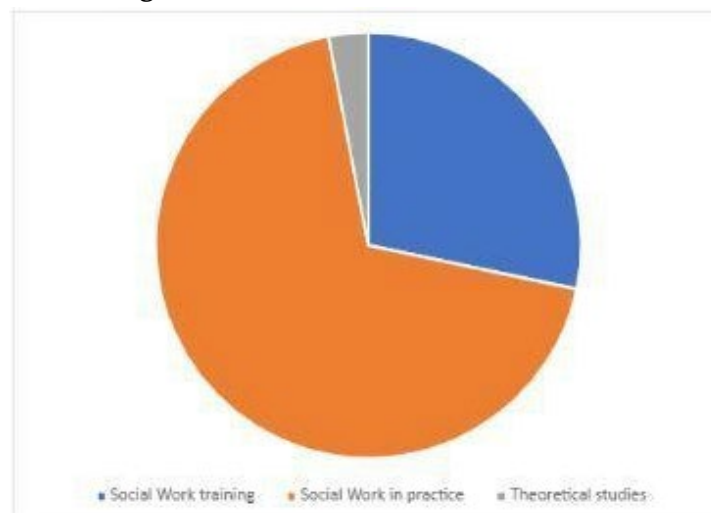
spirituality. This finding suggests a notable interest in understanding how spirituality can be effectively integrated into social worker education and training programs, ultimately preparing professionals to take a more holistic approach to address the spiritual needs of the people they serve.

Over two-thirds (68.7%) of the articles focus on the practice of Social Work. These studies look at how spirituality influences how Social Work services are provided in different contexts and populations. The articles dealing with the practice of Social Work present an interesting mix of areas: mental health and post-traumatic stress are the areas where spirituality is most frequently associated with Social Work, followed to a lesser extent by situations related to bereavement, migration, and the elderly. This reflects the significance and scope of spirituality's impact on social workers' daily activities, from needs assessment to intervention and follow-up.

As can be seen in Figure 1, our analysis shows that just 3% of the articles are theoretical studies on Social Work and how it relates to spirituality. These studies provide a conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding how spirituality and Social Work intersect, exploring significant theoretical concepts, models, and approaches. Though the proportion of articles in this category is much smaller than the other two, it is still essential for developing a solid and theoretically grounded body of knowledge in this emerging field of research.

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**Figure 1. Focus of the selected articles.**



Source: Author's creation.

### 3.2 Relationship between spirituality and religion: RS versus R/S

Our comprehensive analysis of the definitions related to spirituality and religion reveals two remarkably balanced approaches. The first, found in 48.4% of the articles, treats spirituality and religion as distinct spheres (R/S), stressing that they should be considered separately.

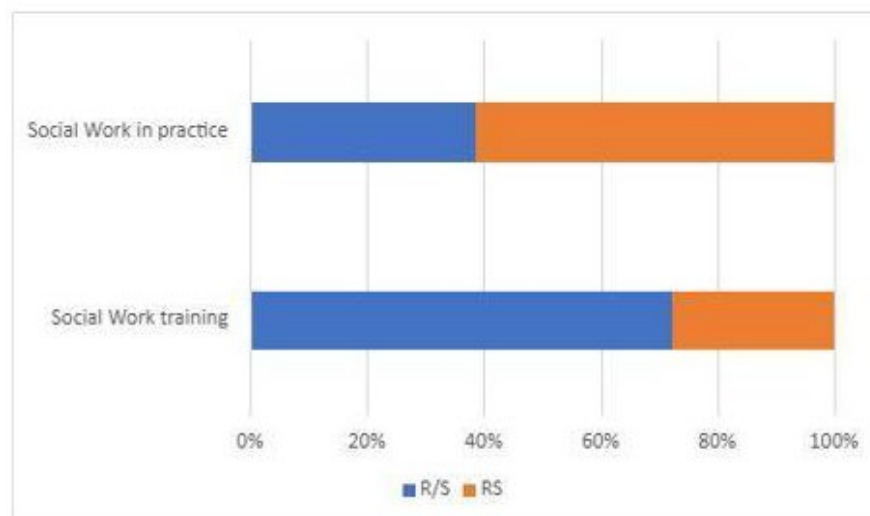


Authors like Kvarfordt *et al.* (2018) mark this distinction further by defining spirituality as 'the human search for meaning, purpose, and connection with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality. However, one understands it. This may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions (p. 8).

The remaining 51.6% of the definitions treat both terms interchangeably, even using an acronym (RS) to refer to the spiritual or religious dimension without making clear distinctions between them. For example, Parada (2022) describes spirituality as 'the pursuit of the sacred in life and the desire to be connected to a greater force or higher power' (p. 351). Other authors suggest that spirituality is experienced religiously, such as Wiley (2020), who writes: 'Spirituality is experienced as private and personal and is connected to interpreting significant questions about meaning and one's relationship to God' (p. 3). Similarly, Stewart *et al.* (2019) view spirituality as "a conceptualization of spirituality more focused on internalized religious or spiritual beliefs" (p. 7).

The correlation between these three types of articles and their approach to the relationship between spirituality and religion reveals the following trends: most (72.2%) of the articles that focused on professional training address the relationship as distinct (R/S), whereas 27.8% view the terms as interchangeable (RS). However, these proportions are reversed in the articles on spirituality in Social Work, as 61.4% treat religion and spirituality indistinctly (RS), whereas 38.6% refer to both as independent realities (R/S). Figure 2 displays this variation, reflecting the diverse approaches and concerns in the spirituality and Social Work literature.

**Figure 2. Correlation between the type of article and its relationship between religion and spirituality.**

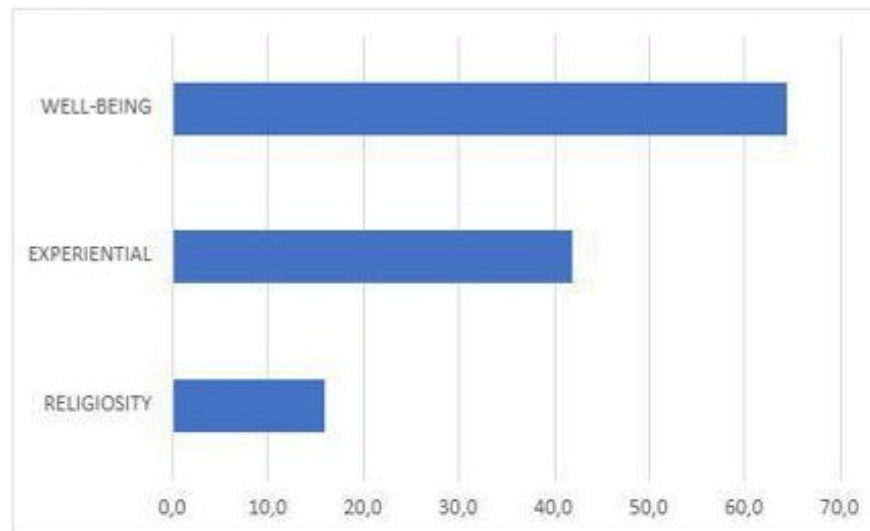


Source: Author's creation.

### 3.3 Approach to Defining Spirituality

After codifying the definitions based on the three categories outlined above (well-being, experiential, and religiosity), our analysis reveals that hardly any definitions correspond to just one category. Figure 3 shows how most definitions (64.5%) depict spirituality as an issue related to well-being. In half the definitions, a clear cognitive component relates spirituality to the meaning of life. Just under half (49.1%) define spirituality as an experience, meaning something in people's lives that projects them towards the absolute. Finally, 16.1% of the definitions make an explicit reference to religiosity.

**Figure 3. Categories of the definitions of spirituality.**



Source: Author's creation.

#### *Spirituality as well-being*

The definition category that relates spirituality with well-being has a tenuous link to religiosity, at just 10%. These definitions approach spirituality as something particular to each individual and related to the meaning of life. For example, Chan (2017) mentions that 'the search for purpose and meaning in life is often considered part of spirituality and experiencing meaning in life can be conceptualized as an aspect of the person' (p. 2). Similarly, Nowakowski-Sims and Kumar (2020) argue that 'spirituality can be thought of as an individual's particular approach or framework for understanding life, purpose, meaning, existence and how that individual relates to others and the universe' (p. 2). Moreover, Ghafournia (2017) asserts that 'religion and spirituality play essential roles in how people give meaning to their life experiences' (p. 147). Some definitions in this category consider resilience a key part of spirituality, which we will examine later.

Callahan and Benner (2018) define spiritual competence as:

(...) a form of cultural competence that operates on a continuum. Spirituality is an important but more ambiguous dimension of diversity; what defines spirituality is relative to each person, although the experience of spirituality has been considered universal. (...) Spirituality can shape human development, lead to the risk of discrimination, and inspire resilience across the lifespan. (...) Spiritual sensitivity reflects awareness of meaningful relationships. (p. 2)

The cultural aspect of spirituality stands out in this definition as an experience intimately linked to the roots of each individual.

### *Spirituality as experience*

Definitions that approach spirituality as an experiential phenomenon usually highlight a sense of transcendence without connection to religion. Drew *et al.* (2022) note: 'Opposite to religion, spirituality (...) pertains to an individual's personal understanding, relationship, and connection with reality and/or a higher power, regardless of religious affiliation' (p. 105). Similarly, Hodge (2017) states that:

Spirituality is 'experiential aspects of human existence that transcend sensory phenomena' (Hodge, Bonifas, & Wolosin, 2013, p. 284). Every human being experiences joy, grief, hope, meaning, and other aspects of human existence that transcend empirically oriented sensory phenomena. (p. 4)

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Some definitions mention an immaterial or supernatural reality. Ossey (2020) expresses this idea as 'beliefs or feelings about supernatural phenomena such as life after death, the existence of a soul apart from the human body, and the presence of spiritual energy in physical things' (p. 17). According to this perspective, spirituality can include deeply held beliefs in phenomena that are neither tangible nor observable via conventional empirical methods yet that are perceived through personal and subjective experiences. It depicts spirituality as a sphere where the immaterial and transcendental hold significant value in people's lives, irrespective of any particular religious context.

The definitions in this category often refer to the transcendent or a higher being. Parada (2022) asserts that 'spirituality is understood as the pursuit of the sacred in life and the desire to be connected to a greater force or higher power' (p. 351). This perspective highlights the intrinsic connection between spirituality and the search for something that transcends daily existence, a yearning to find meaning in the divine or a higher entity.

### *Spirituality as religiosity*

Only 20% of the definitions in this group establish a clear connection with religiosity. Stewart *et al.* (2019) write that spirituality is 'a more internalized conceptualization of religiosity'

(p. 7), suggesting that spirituality emerges as a profound personal experience related to religion, distinct from it due to its introspective and subjective nature. Al-Ma'seb (2019) proposes that spirituality is the 'devotion to the immaterial part of humanity and nature, rather than worldly things' (p. 181). According to this view, spirituality describes an individual's relationship with God. It is an internal and external source of strength that helps people to deal with their problems, as they can lean on their beliefs to make decisions.

Hodge (2019) also takes a comprehensive approach to spirituality, arguing that 'spirituality is widely understood as an individual's personal, subjective relationship with God, or more broadly the sacred or the transcendent' (p. 123). He later says, 'prayer, meditation, singing, scripture reading and exposition are common expressions of spiritual practices' (Hodge, 2020, p. 10). These practices help connect with the sacred and are tools for personal growth and building resilience, as they give people a way to cope with life's challenges and find comfort in their spiritual beliefs.

Overall, these definitions hold that even though spirituality is often entwined with aspects of religiosity, it is distinguished by its emphasis on personal experience and its direct connection to the transcendent, which makes it a vital and multifaceted aspect of the human experience.

### 3.4 Concepts appearing in the definitions of spirituality

We assigned up to three labels to identify the main areas of spirituality mentioned in the definitions. Figure 4 presents a synthetic overview of the main concepts associated with the definitions and their prevalence.

**Figure 4. Cloud of the main concepts appearing in the definitions.**



Source: Author's creation.

## Meaning

The results indicate that meaning is the central concept, cutting through all the definitions. It is a relational concept that can be analyzed as a purpose and source of guidance and direction in life by which people bestow their actions meaning fully (Antón-Hurtado, 2012). Torralba (2010) asserts that meaning is the first expression that human beings are not merely facts of nature and are open to realities and values that give dignity to their lives (p. 80).

In their research on the spiritual competences of end-of-life care professionals, Pomeroy *et al.* (2021) describe spirituality as 'a human quality to search for meanings, well-being, and profundity through connections with ourselves, others, and the universe' (p. 7). This definition closely resembles the one proposed by Oxhandler *et al.* (2020):

A universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for meaning, purpose, morality, well-being, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others, and ultimate reality, however understood (...), connotes a process and way of being. (p. 2)

Both definitions emphasize the connection between spirituality and the meaning of life as an essential part of the spiritual dimension of human beings, who can pause and question the meaning and purpose of their lives, especially when plunged into chaos. This connection reflects people's ability to stand back and ponder the significance and direction of their lives, especially in turbulent circumstances. This approach benefits Social Work professionals since it helps reduce complexity and guides people in making decisions (Antón-Hurtado, 2012).

Along these same lines, following quantitative research with professionals who treat people with post-traumatic stress disorder, Weinberg (2020) takes the position that 'spiritual perceptions can assist the creation of a positive narrative and meaning in life, in the face of stressful and difficult life situations' (p. 3). This link between spirituality, meaning, and resilience introduces the next group of spirituality-related concepts.

## Resilient factor

Spirituality as a resilient factor is the second key concept associated with the definitions. In her qualitative research on Muslim women and domestic violence, Ghafournia (2017) finds that 'religion and spirituality were a source of resilience and empowerment' (p. 152) since making sense of the limitations that eventually appear along life's path is one of the characteristics of spiritual intelligence. Social Work professionals support people who come up against evidence of life's finite nature and limitations daily. Taking this same approach to the concept, Al-Ma'seb (2019) explains the importance of integrating spirituality into clinical Social Work since it is 'an internal and external strength that can help clients face their problems and that clients can depend on their beliefs when making their decisions' (p. 181).

Taking an arts-based visual research approach to explore how Puerto Rican families adjust after a natural disaster, Sato *et al.* (2022) conclude that 'religiosity and spirituality play an important role in the lived experiences for Latino families, particularly during times of major life adversities such as natural disasters' (p. 99). Their conclusion is shared by Royse and Badger (2017), who found in their quantitative study of people who have had near-death experiences that 'religion/spirituality can play a significant role in coping with a major trauma or injury' (p. 10).

## Connection

The third key concept appearing in the definitions is the one to which we refer with the term 'connection', where ideas of a higher power, God, or a relationship with the intangible come together. Our contemporary understanding of spirituality notably defines this concept from a cognitive perspective related to personal well-being. However, it also takes a transcendent approach that involves a departure from the self and projection toward another realm of reality. This suggests that spirituality includes a dimension beyond the purely tangible and rational whilst still being linked to personal growth and well-being.

In a cross-sectional study with social workers, Drew *et al.* (2022) define spirituality as 'an individual's personal understanding, relationship, and connection with reality and/or a higher power' (p. 105), indicating that it transcends religion. This opens spirituality to people with diverse beliefs and backgrounds and conceives of transcendental experiences outside the boundaries of religion. In an existential approach to Social Work, Nilsson (2018) expands on connection by stating that 'spirituality refers to various aspects such as transcendence, connections with a higher power, and relational awareness, or meaningful relationships with other important people' (p. 10). This definition holds that spirituality is about connecting with a higher power and building deep and meaningful relationships with others, which is essential for people's emotional and social well-being.

## Identity

After analyzing the three concepts that appear most frequently in the definitions of spirituality, we shift our attention to two less prevalent ones that are particularly important for understanding certain aspects of the spiritual dimension. One of these concepts is identity, understood as a way of being and acting that gives meaning to life and is closely linked to individuals' inner world, where their values and beliefs are forged. 'Because it sustains decisive ways of being and acting in the course of anyone's daily life' (Álvarez-Munárriz, 2011, p. 409), identity is essential for decision-making. In this regard, in their quantitative study on the effect of spirituality on Social Work professionals, Rinkel *et al.* (2018) argue that 'spirituality is being explored as a key component to organizational change and transformation with particular attention to the importance of personal alignment of organizational values with personal values and goals' (p. 333).



Suppose the dynamism of identity is an essential feature of the spiritual dimension (Benavent-Vallès *et al.*, 2021). In that case, the authors of a study on the role of spirituality in Social Work professionals' assessments conclude that 'spirituality can be a valuable source of identity formation and development' (Omone-Bose *et al.*, 2022, p. 298). This relationship is especially significant for migrants, who belong to a spiritual community, which can provide an essential connection for meeting the challenges of living far from their origin (Fanega-Valencia & Benavent-Vallès, 2024). This connection is a visible and comprehensive part of some cultures. In this same vein, in a study on social work education, Agbawodikeizu *et al.* (2022) stress the importance of understanding how religion and spirituality shape people's lives, since they 'are inextricably intertwined with other aspects of people's identity, leading to culture being understood in Nigeria as a way of life' (p. 333).

In an ethnographic study on HIV-positive women, Runnels *et al.* (2018) found that spirituality is directly related to identity, understood in its ontological and psychosocial aspects, stating that 'many survivors of abuse report that spirituality is a main component of their identity, a source of strength and healing' (p. 397). Identity, spirituality, and resilience are united and inseparable in these cases. Spirituality provides a sense of belonging and purpose, a defense mechanism, and a way to regain one's footing in adversity.

### *Inwardness*

Finally, some definitions emphasize inwardness, understood as a more expansive space than that of spirituality itself. According to Torralba (2019), inwardness refers to a dimension of human beings that constitutes their lifeforce despite being imperceptible from the outside. This idea stresses the importance of inner sources of energy and direction in people's lives.

In his study on older African American adults, Cosby (2020) describes spirituality as a bridge between individuals and their environment, defining it as an 'inwardly focused quality that allows each person to connect with themselves and others around them and in the natural world' (p. 3). In a study based on psychosynthesis, Audate (2022) depicts it as an inner source of wisdom and creativity that 'is a better source of guidance and direction for us than either the advice of others or the decision at which we arrive more intellectually' (p. 373). In this way, spirituality transcends practice or belief and is an intimate dimension that impacts all existence.

## **4. Conclusions**

Our research has led to three key conclusions about the relationship between spirituality and Social Work that may serve as a basis for proposing a new definition.



## Problems in defining the concept of spirituality

First, we must consider the problems in accurately defining the term 'spirituality' since the concept often carries religious connotations, which can erect obstacles to considering it a universal human dimension in specific cultural contexts. The primacy of empirical evidence as a basis for professional intervention in Social Work limits the inclusion of discourses on spirituality, making it harder to integrate as part of the professional approach.

## Relationship between spirituality and religion

Although spirituality and religion share a common ground in searching for meaning and answering major existential questions, the literature distinguishes between two main approaches. Some authors treat both terms as synonymous, whereas others are inclined to differentiate them. As such, studies on training social workers usually separate spirituality from religion, whilst research on spirituality in professional practice tends to combine them. This reflects a conceptual duality that varies depending on the focus of each study.

Furthermore, separating the concepts of religiosity and spirituality is an appropriate strategy for addressing the training of future professionals. In contemporary societies, where religious institutions have lost some influence and individualism is viewed as more important, many people (especially young people) tend to hold spirituality in high regard, whilst institutionalized religion is viewed with mistrust. Training approaches must be adapted to the cultural trends driving these changing perceptions.

## Main approaches to the concept of spirituality

The third conclusion strengthens the dual view of spirituality in Social Work: nearly half the definitions collected in our research approach spirituality as a cognitive phenomenon associated with well-being, connecting with the self and resilience, whilst the other half focus on its experiential nature and a connection beyond the individual, whether with other people or with a non-material, universal dimension. Studies that exclusively link spirituality to religiosity are mostly limited to specific religious contexts.

## Proposed definition of spirituality suitable for Social Work professionals

Combining the three key concepts from the definitions analyzed (meaning, resilience, and connection) provides what we could consider a contemporary definition of spirituality for Social Work professionals. These three concepts are crucial for addressing spirituality today and serve as a basis for integrating it into professional practice. We conclude this review by proposing a

definition of spirituality for social workers that integrates the nuances identified across 62 academic articles on spirituality and Social Work.

Spirituality is a *human capacity* related to all aspects of inwardness aimed at finding *meaning* in life-based on an experience of *connection* with oneself, others, and some higher reality, thereby acting as an important, *resilient factor*.

## A human capacity

Defining spirituality as a human capacity emphasizes its universal nature and rootedness in symbolic thought. According to Marina and Rambaud (2018), this capacity radically transformed how we interpret the world. Like other human capacities, spirituality can develop and mature throughout life, constantly interacting with the cultural, social, and historical context, transcending binary views of its presence or absence.

Recent neuroscience research has found specific areas of the brain linked to spirituality and has recorded brain activity during practices that cultivate it (Nogués, 2007; Zohar & Marshall, 2001). This approach to spirituality as a capacity rather than as a shortcoming invites Social Work professionals to acknowledge the spiritual strengths of the people they serve (Lorenzo, 2018).

## Related to meaning

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Frankl (1998) defined the meaning of life as its central motivating factor. Regardless of the situation, everyone yearns to live a meaningful life that brings inner peace and harmony to their most private self. This meaning, which is connected to what people value, desire, or love, guides their decisions. Maslow (1972) said that self-realization is the primary driving force of life, asserting that external values can only be entirely found within.

Esquirol (2015) connects the meaning of life with everyday life, arguing that what is essential is found in what is nearby and simple. Professionals who work with vulnerable people must be sensitive to expressions of meaning in words and silence since vulnerability highlights what is essential. Damasio (2018) states that the solution to chaos is trust, cooperation, and altruism—in other words, connection.

## An experience of connection

Understood as an experience, spirituality transcends the rational. It is not defined as a belief or a narrative but rather as something that interferes with and manifests in everyday life. Everyone has experienced connection at some point: with oneself (introspection or identity), with others (cooperation, gratitude, solidarity, empathy, or rootedness), or with an all-encompassing intangible reality (divinity, universe, nature, life, or ideology). Contemporary attitudes to

spirituality risk limiting it to just one of these areas, losing sight of the fact that the meaning of life is related to them all.

It is easy for us to recognize some of these connections in our lives, and people often share stories of these experiences when supporting or receiving support from others. Experiences of connection vary according to each individual's life and cultural background. Social Work professionals must keep an open mind and practice spiritual listening to recognize these experiences in the people they support.

### **A resilient factor**

Most studies on spirituality and Social Work focus on mental health issues, post-traumatic stress, migration, grief, aging, and other situations of great suffering. Whether religious or not, spirituality is associated with meaningfulness, gratitude, inner peace, and the ability to make positive decisions.

However, some spiritual experiences can cause harm. Therefore, it is critical to promote a spirituality that fosters resilience. The search for meaning is a personal and private endeavor and a collective, constructive effort. Grané and Forés (2007) assert that resilience is based on shared meaning, and Frankl (1998) reports that wounded people can progress toward fulfillment if they find meaning in their circumstances.

### **Limitations and future outlook**

This review has addressed general definitions of spirituality in social work. However, since Social Work encompasses a wide range of areas of intervention, future research could explore how spirituality is conceived in each of these areas to identify nuances and specific approaches.

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