

Humanity and Spirituality in Social Work Practice: A Qualitative Study on Mental Health and Healing

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how humanity and spirituality function as interconnected aspects of mental health and healing in social work practice. Rooted in phenomenology and guided by principles of intervention research, two focus groups were conducted: one with eight clients of The Village Nac, a nonprofit organization in Texas, and another with eight licensed social workers from across the United States. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes—compassion as relational healing, spirituality as resilience and meaning, belonging as part of recovery, and ethical responsibility as a form of transformation. The findings show that humanity and spirituality form moral and relational foundations for effective social work, promoting resilience, belonging, and empowerment. The study concludes that incorporating these dimensions into education, practice, and policy can enhance ethical awareness and support holistic well-being in diverse settings.

Keywords: Humanity, Spirituality, Mental health, Qualitative research, Social work practice, Phenomenology

Introduction

Social work is based on promoting human dignity, compassion, and justice—values that form the ethical and professional core of the field (NASW, 2021). As modern practice increasingly intersects with mental health issues, practitioners are encouraged to incorporate emotional, spiritual, and moral aspects into client care. Humanity and spirituality, long acknowledged as vital to human well-being, remain underexplored in professional frameworks despite their potential to enhance resilience, belonging, and healing (Hodge et al., 2025; Smith & Read, 2025). This study examines how these principles influence mental health practice and provides insights into their role in creating ethical, compassionate service.

Recent research confirms that spirituality helps with meaning-making, reducing stress, and recovery for those facing psychological distress (López-Tarrida et al., 2024). Similarly, compassion-driven engagement—the core of humanity—builds trust, empowerment, and therapeutic bonds, especially in marginalized and areas where social and emotional support is scarce (Ramanathan et al., 2025). However, many practitioners feel unprepared to address clients' spiritual and existential concerns in culturally sensitive ways (Vieten et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need to focus more on the moral and relational parts of practice.

Integrating humanity and spirituality requires recognizing that effective mental health care goes beyond clinical techniques to include empathy, ethical reflection, and authentic connection. When practitioners engage with clients through moral sensitivity and mindful presence, they foster deeper healing and resilience that align with the holistic mission of social work (Hodge et al., 2025; Ramanathan et al., 2025). Humanity becomes not only a moral ideal but a method of practice—an approach that emphasizes compassion and shared humanity as the foundation for helping.

Comment [A1]: marginalized "what"?
sentence is confusing

The present study explores the lived experiences of social workers and clients who embody these principles in mental health contexts. By employing a qualitative approach, this research aims to illuminate how humanity and spirituality function as guiding forces in practice and how they contribute to well-being, ethical awareness, and community connectedness. Findings from this study contribute to the growing evidence base supporting holistic, spiritually informed social work that bridges scientific knowledge with the moral essence of human care.

Comment [A2]: which principles?

Method

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of clients and social workers concerning humanity and spirituality in social work practice. Phenomenology was selected because it provides an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and meanings related to mental health and healing (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The study aimed to uncover how compassion, spirituality, and moral responsibility influence therapeutic relationships and resilience in both community-based and professional settings.

Research Context

The study was conducted in collaboration with *The Village Nac*, a nonprofit organization in Texas that provides services addressing poverty, homelessness, and mental health needs. This context was selected because it represents a faith-inspired, community-driven model of care that integrates practical assistance with spiritual and relational support.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure participants had direct experience with the phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Two focus groups were conducted.

Focus Group 1 included eight clients of *The Village Nac* (four male, four female) who had received services addressing homelessness, poverty, or emotional distress.

Focus Group 2 consisted of eight licensed social workers from across the United States, two of whom explicitly incorporated spirituality into their practice.

Participants were selected based on their willingness to reflect on compassion, spirituality, and moral responsibility in their personal or professional lives. The study prioritized information richness over statistical representation, consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured focus group interviews conducted in person and via Zoom. Questions focused on how participants define and experience humanity, spirituality, and mental health in their personal and professional lives. Open-ended prompts encouraged reflection on belonging, resilience, and ethical engagement. Each session lasted approximately 60–75 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed through open coding and thematic content analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017). The process consisted of three iterative stages:

1. Initial Coding: Identifying keywords and phrases that reflected participants' expressions of humanity, spirituality, and healing.
2. Categorization: Grouping codes into broader categories such as compassion as moral action, spirituality as strength, and belonging as recovery.
3. Theme Development: Synthesizing categories into overarching themes that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher engaged in reflexivity—recognizing their positionality as a practitioner-scholar and maintaining an audit trail of analytic memos to ensure transparency and credibility.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened through member reflection, peer debriefing, and triangulation with both client and practitioner data. Dependability and confirmability were secured by thoroughly documenting analytical procedures. Transferability was supported by providing contextual details of the setting and participants characteristics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards adhered to the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) and institutional review procedures. Participants received detailed consent forms explaining the purpose, risks, and voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was preserved through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Discussions related to spirituality and faith were approached with cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse beliefs.

This methodology offered an in-depth, ethically based exploration of how humanity and spirituality manifest within mental health practice. The phenomenological approach highlighted the shared meaning of compassion and moral responsibility, creating a foundation for understanding the intersection of faith, ethics, and mental well-being in social work.

Literature Review

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Humanity as an Ethical Foundation in Social Work

Humanity, often shown through compassion, empathy, and moral responsibility, has long been central to social work ethics (NASW, 2021). In modern literature, humanity is regaining its place as a professional skill rather than just a philosophical idea. Recent research shows that compassion-based practice enhances client engagement, the therapeutic relationship, and the well-being of practitioners (Ramanathan et al., 2025; Hodge et al., 2025). Compassionate interactions—such as listening without judgment or treating clients with unconditional respect—help build trust and support healing among individuals facing poverty or mental health challenges.

Comment [A4]: Author uses term, "modern literature" that is confusing, especially without context of how and if the literature was different in the past, contrasted to the modern.

Humanity also acts as an ethical check against the increasing technocratic focus of social services. Scholars argue that managerialism and evidence-based mandates tend to overshadow relational care, especially in rural and marginalized communities (Smith & Read, 2025). Including humanity in practice shifts the definition of effectiveness to encompass moral presence, humility, and justice. In mental health settings, this humanistic approach allows practitioners to connect genuinely with clients whose experiences of trauma or stigma often make them feel alienated from formal care systems.

Spirituality and Mental Health

Spirituality has gained renewed empirical attention as a dimension of holistic health. Current research associates spiritual engagement with lower anxiety, greater meaning-making, and better recovery outcomes (López-Tarrida et al., 2024). Social work scholars increasingly see spirituality as a cultural and existential resource that promotes resilience and belonging (Hodge et al., 2025). However, many practitioners still report limited training in addressing clients' spiritual needs or in differentiating spirituality from religion in ethically appropriate ways (Vieten et al., 2023).

Emerging frameworks promote spiritual sensitivity as a professional skill rooted in cultural humility and reflexivity. Instead of imposing belief systems, spiritually informed practice encourages exploring hope, forgiveness, and connectedness as therapeutic processes. This method aligns with mindfulness-based and trauma-informed paradigms that emphasize inner awareness and moral attunement (Ramanathan et al., 2025).

Intersections of Humanity, Spirituality, and Mental Health

Recent integrative studies highlight how humanity and spirituality serve as complementary paths to mental health recovery. Compassionate interventions, such as reflective listening or gratitude exercises, activate neural mechanisms tied to empathy and emotional regulation (Hodge et al., 2025). Spiritual reflection likewise fosters resilience by providing meaning frameworks that help reduce despair and self-stigma (López-Tarrida et al., 2024). Collectively, these aspects create a relational foundation for healing that goes beyond just managing symptoms and focuses on moral growth and connection.

Within social-work practice, this intersection requires both ethical awareness and adaptable methods. Practitioners must manage professional boundaries while fostering genuine engagement, ensuring that spiritual conversations remain client-led and culturally respectful (Vieten et al., 2023). Research also indicates that communities combining faith-based supports with secular mental health services experience higher client satisfaction and longer-lasting recovery (Smith & Read, 2025).

Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing attention, three key gaps persist.

Conceptual clarity—Humanity and spirituality are often treated separately rather than as interdependent constructs shaping practice.

Empirical grounding—Few qualitative studies capture lived experiences of both clients and practitioners engaged in humanity-centered work. Please discuss the “few”—Which, if any qualitative studies, come close?

Contextual application—Most research emphasizes urban or institutional settings, leaving, community-based perspectives underrepresented.

Addressing these gaps is crucial for creating integrative frameworks that incorporate compassion and spiritual awareness into evidence-based social work models. The current study addresses this by exploring how humanity and spirituality function together in mental health practice, providing insights that connect ethical ideals with real-world experiences.

Comment [A5]: Please discuss the “few” qualitative studies that do exist? Which, if any qualitative studies, come close?

Comment [A6]: This is confusing—Please provide examples/citations for the existing studies, proving there is a gap.

Comment [A7]: Research Question—Note: Phenomenology methods include research questions, usually in the form of exploring “lived experiences” of the phenomenon, usually an open-ended question.

Findings

The qualitative analysis identified four main themes that explain how humanity and spirituality serve as healing forces in social work practice: (1) Compassion as Relational Healing, (2) Spirituality as Resilience and Meaning, (3) Belonging as Recovery, and (4) Ethical Responsibility as Transformation. These themes collectively show that the practice of humanity and spirituality goes beyond technical skills, acting as a moral, relational, and existential foundation for social work engagement.

Theme 1: Compassion as Relational Healing

Participants consistently described compassion as the core of humanity in practice. Acts of kindness, listening without judgment, and treating people with dignity were seen as therapeutic interventions on their own. One client shared, “When someone really listens—not to fix me, but to see me—that’s when I start to heal.” Social workers echoed that view, highlighting the transformative effect of relational presence. A licensed social worker noted, “It’s not always about clinical tools; sometimes it’s just sitting with someone in silence.” Compassion was viewed as a relational bridge that restored dignity and fostered safety, especially among individuals who experienced trauma, stigma, or social isolation. This theme aligns with Hodge et al. (2025), who identified compassion as a driving force behind both client engagement and practitioner well-being.

Theme 2: Spirituality as Resilience and Meaning

Spirituality became an important source of inner strength, hope, and healing. Clients often linked spiritual reflection and prayer to their ability to withstand hardship. One client said, “Faith kept me going when nothing else worked—when I felt invisible, I still believed I

mattered.” Practitioners saw spirituality as a resource that supported evidence-based practice by addressing existential needs and encouraging holistic care. They highlighted that spiritual sensitivity involves humility and openness, not proselytizing. As one licensed social worker explained, “Spirituality gives people language for meaning; my job is to listen, not lead.” This theme aligns with current literature affirming spirituality as a foundation for resilience and recovery (López-Tarrida et al., 2024; Ramanathan et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Belonging as Recovery

Both clients and licensed social workers emphasized belonging as a protective factor for mental health. Many clients identified community connection—whether through The Village Nac, church groups, or peer circles—as vital for restoring purpose and self-worth. One participant reflected, “When you feel like you belong somewhere, you start to believe you can heal.” Licensed Social workers reported that inclusive environments fostered trust and long-term engagement. They described belonging as both an outcome and a process: creating spaces where clients felt valued, seen, and connected. This finding aligns with Smith and Read (2025), who highlight belonging as a relational determinant of recovery and social reintegration. In practice, belonging also reduces isolation and boosts community resilience.

Theme 4: Ethical Responsibility as Transformation

The final theme highlighted that ethical practice requires active compassion and justice, not neutrality. Participants described humanity as moral action—advocating for fairness, standing against stigma, and demonstrating integrity in daily practice. A licensed social worker said, “Humanity is ethics in motion. It’s choosing compassion even when systems make it hard.” Clients also saw ethics as relational, based on honesty and fairness. They linked transformation

to being treated not as a case but as a human being. This theme emphasizes the moral aspect of professional care, aligning with NASW's (2021) ethical principles of dignity and justice. It also shows that moral sensitivity and empathy help empower and transform both clients and practitioners (Ramanathan et al., 2025).

Summary of Findings

Across all themes, participants described humanity and spirituality as interconnected aspects of mental health and healing. Compassion built relational safety, spirituality strengthened resilience, belonging supported recovery, and ethical responsibility encouraged transformation. These findings suggest that combining humanity and spirituality boosts both individual and collective well-being. They also support the growing movement for a relational and ethically grounded approach to social work that blends scientific knowledge with moral presence.

Discussion and Implications

This study examined how humanity and spirituality serve as interconnected aspects of healing within social work practice. The results confirm that compassion, belonging, and ethical responsibility are not minor feelings but vital mechanisms that influence clients' mental health and practitioners' moral engagement. By integrating these aspects, social work can reaffirm its identity as a profession rooted equally in science and human connection.

Humanity as a Relational Practice

The theme of compassion as relational healing supports existing research that highlights empathy and moral presence as essential to effective helping relationships (Hodge et al., 2025; Ramanathan et al., 2025). Participants highlighted that genuine compassion restored dignity and safety, reaffirming the profession's ethical foundation of respect for human worth (NASW,

2021). These findings show that acts of kindness—such as listening carefully or expressing care—can be just as therapeutically meaningful as technical interventions.

For practitioners, this highlights the importance of viewing compassion not just as a personal virtue but as a professional skill developed through reflective supervision, self-awareness, and organizational support. Training in moral sensitivity and emotional intelligence can improve practitioners' ability to engage ethically and authentically, especially in mental health settings where clients often experience deep vulnerability.

Spirituality as a Pathway to Resilience

Findings on spirituality mirror recent research linking spiritual practices to greater meaning, self-efficacy, and mental well-being (López-Tarrida et al., 2024). Participants described spirituality as a personal yet universally available resource that builds resilience and hope. Social workers' reflections further show that spirituality can enhance professional ethics by fostering humility, gratitude, and a sense of shared humanity.

These results support integrating spiritual sensitivity into social work education and clinical practice. Such integration should avoid doctrinal approaches and instead focus on client-led exploration of meaning and purpose. Educational programs could include modules on spiritual assessment, reflective dialogue, and interfaith cultural humility to prepare practitioners for ethically grounded spiritual engagement.

Belonging and Community as Healing Contexts

The theme of belonging as recovery emphasizes the social aspect of healing and the significance of community-centered care models. Participants' experiences at The Village Nac show how inclusive, relational settings improve mental health outcomes through connection and

mutual support. This aligns with current efforts to promote community mental health and peer-based recovery approaches (Smith & Read, 2025). I am not able to understand what author is trying to convey about “belonging”---does this relate directly to demographic variables of the participants or The Village Nac’s clients? What is belonging and how does it elevated to an “ethical duty”?

In social work practice, belonging should be seen as both an outcome and an ethical duty. Practitioners ought to promote environments—whether organizational, educational, or community-based—where individuals feel recognized and appreciated. This is especially important in marginalized areas, where isolation and stigma weaken resilience.

Ethical Responsibility and the Moral Dimensions of Practice

The theme of ethical responsibility as transformation expands the understanding of professional ethics beyond mere compliance to include active justice and relational integrity. Practitioners in this study described ethics as “humanity in motion”—a call to act compassionately even within restrictive systems. This perspective aligns with Reamer’s (2023) assertion that ethical social work requires courage, moral reflection, and advocacy for justice.

This study encourages the profession to see ethics as a practical, lived experience that connects moral philosophy with social action. Using reflective ethics training, compassion-centered supervision, and policy advocacy rooted in human dignity can help achieve this change.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Education, and Research

Practice: Social workers should intentionally incorporate humanity and spirituality into all levels of intervention. Practical tools—such as reflective logs, compassion checklists, or peer dialogue circles—can assist in integrating these values into daily routines.

Education: Schools of social work should incorporate humanity and spirituality into curricula covering practice, ethics, and diversity. Faculty development should involve strategies for fostering reflective and compassionate learning environments that exemplify humanity-centered pedagogy.

Research: Future studies could build on this work by exploring how humanity-centered interventions influence mental health outcomes. Using mixed-methods and cross-cultural approaches may enhance understanding of how compassion and spirituality connect with resilience, empowerment, and justice.

Policy: Policymakers should acknowledge compassion and spiritual well-being as key aspects of public health. Supporting community-based, humanity-centered initiatives—like The Village Nac—through funding can enhance collective mental health and promote social inclusion.

The study's findings reaffirm that humanity and spirituality are not abstract ideals but tangible forces of healing and transformation. They challenge the profession to reclaim its moral roots and recognize that the heart of social work lies not only in evidence-based practice but in ethically grounded, compassionate engagement. As the profession confronts global mental health challenges, re-centering humanity and spirituality provides both a moral compass and a path toward sustainable well-being.

Comment [A8]: There needs to be section or a few sentences describing the limitations of the study especially the exploratory nature and limited generalizability.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study adds to the growing body of research confirming that humanity and spirituality are fundamental—rather than merely peripheral—to ethical and effective social work

practice. Based on the lived experiences of clients and practitioners, the findings show that compassion, belonging, and moral responsibility are vital mechanisms of healing in mental health settings. These aspects embody the moral core of social work: to serve with empathy, integrity, and respect for human dignity.

By emphasizing humanity as relational practice and spirituality as a source of resilience, the study connects theory with lived experience. It highlights that effective mental health care requires not only technical skill but also the moral presence to support individuals through suffering and change. For social workers, this means engaging clients not just as service recipients but as fellow human beings linked through shared vulnerability and hope.

Future research should continue developing frameworks informed by humanity and spirituality through interdisciplinary and empirical methods. Mixed-methods and longitudinal studies could explore how compassion-based interventions affect well-being, resilience, and practitioner self-care. Educational research might investigate how spiritually sensitive and humanity-centered teaching improves ethical skills and emotional intelligence among social work students.

Finally, as global crises continue to reveal collective fragility and interconnectedness, humanity and spirituality provide a universal language for healing and justice. Social work, as both a moral and professional discipline, is uniquely equipped to support this vision—reminding the field that effective practice starts not with technique, but with the courage to care.

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