

**Focused Issues in Family Therapy**

*Series Editor: D. Russell Crane*

Suzanne M. Coyle

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# Spirituality in Systemic Family Therapy Supervision and Training



Springer

# **Focused Issues in Family Therapy**

## **Series Editor**

D. Russell Crane, School of Family Life  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, UT, USA

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Suzanne M. Coyle

# Spirituality in Systemic Family Therapy Supervision and Training

 Springer

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*Dedicated to my past and present students at  
Christian Theological Seminary who make  
supervision challenging.*

# Preface

Growing up in a rural community, I became aware of the many ways that neighbors' lives overlapped and intersected. I would often say that rural neighbors know what you have done even when you have not done it. Party phone lines were a sure conduit to community gossip, as were the local gathering places: gas stations and country stores.

My father was a farmer and my mother a public school teacher. This couple arrangement was common in rural Kentucky. It seemed normal to me. However, I vividly remember a summer in our lives that gave me the breadth and depth of rural life in its storytelling.

In addition to his farming, Daddy ran a gas station/country store, and the manager of the store quit unexpectedly. Mama decided to help during her summer break from teaching. And I, around 7 years old, took seriously my job dusting the shelves lined with canned goods, bread, milk, and the everyday vittles that a rural family needed. Sometimes, I even pumped gas. Mama was known far and wide for her hamburgers flipped on an iron grill. Truckers stopped just to gobble down her hamburgers.

The vivid memory I have, however, is the storytelling that happened every day in every hour. Usually, the men of the community gathered to tell stories without end. I was fascinated. Sometimes, the men laughed and said, "You know how those women talk!" Yes, a dominant narrative of my era. Yet, to myself, I thought the men did an excellent job of talking themselves. I loved the storytelling and vowed to become a storyteller myself.

My journey began as I listened and reveled in the stories I heard everywhere. I heard of the virtues of "city life" in my hometown of 5000 people. But nothing could match in my child's mind the magic of "country life" with its stories. The beauty shop, a brief journey into city life, breathed stories. The on-the-grounds dinners and fish fries at my home church, Beech Fork Baptist Church in rural Gravel Switch, were full of stories, testimonies of being saved or, at times, not being so saved.

Both true and not so true, from these stories came a realization that my family members and I were indeed individuals. Good storytelling involved stretching the

story so it became a thick description of culture. The seemingly thin stories of rural life did indeed have much diversity. We were not self-contained individuals or even a self-contained family. We lived in a community context full of values that existed through people's lives and actions.

Some of these values permeated who my family and I were, along with our neighbors. These values became nested in us.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this diversity wove itself into what we in our community believed gave us meaning. It was our diversity wedded to values that formed our spirituality, which became grounded and either grew or withered.

Through these experiences, I became convinced that spirituality is best understood through the lenses of diversity and of the self of person. Both the lenses look at what is unique about each person. These lenses are critically connected in the community and with its many systems and stories.

One might argue that the community I grew up in was not diverse. We were largely white with some Black families. Other ethnicities were not known. My family had Jewish friends in a neighboring town. They owned the clothing store where my mother, grandmother, and I shopped. I knew nothing, however, about my ethnicity.

In rural storytelling, I learned that diversity includes all our modern definitions of diversity in this age of Black Lives Matter and Gay Pride. So, it is cultural. But it also involved who we are as individuals and the ways we align ourselves to diversity even if we are white.

It was not until I moved to New Jersey and graduate school that I became aware of my Irish heritage. It was interesting to me that many of the values that have been passed down from generation to generation were now a part of who I was. Values of family, hard work, and a profound sense of tragedy permeated our family stories.

My home community has changed. Diversity now includes white families and an increase in Black families and Hispanic families. Yet, diversity existed in my growing up years as well. My family and our neighbors carried with us a sense of both who we were and what we wanted to become. Thus, our lives were founded on finding meaning in our everyday living that would carry us into the future.

The ways we found meaning focused on our values, which were woven into our very diversity. Our ethnic identity in a rural community emphasized hard work, perseverance, and independence. Though ethnic identity was interlaced with class, some of us experienced being "looked down upon" by others from a "citified" and regional perspective. I was very aware of the difference between "city kids" and "country kids." Of course, "city" was a relative term in my hometown of 5000 people.

Acquiring an education became a way for us country people to acquire status with non-rural folks. In addition, even that had its limits in academic settings. I was the speech teacher's project in graduate school to eradicate my Kentucky accent, replacing it with a more East Coast version.

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<sup>1</sup>Diversity in this book describes multicultural diversities as well as the diversities with which individuals may align.

Through these experiences, other rural people and I drew strength within us to meet challenges that were the norm for adjusting to the dominant values of city/suburban life. For many of us, a spunky spirituality expressed through our unique rural ethnicity gave us the courage to stand up to small oppressions of various kinds.

As we navigated these oppressions, our spirituality became a way in which we viewed our unique diversity. Furthermore, underlying the diversity was our self of person: the ways in which we viewed ourselves and the ways in which who we were related to our spirituality. I believe for us southern rural people, our spirituality was a large lens through which we viewed our diversity, not the other way around.

I now write about spirituality from my social location of being a white, heterosexual, cisgender female who has currently has mobility challenges. My prayer is that all of us from our unique social locations can converse about our shared experiences as humans who look to the future with our hopes and dreams. It is through these hopes and dreams that generative storytelling can emerge in which liberative spirituality can foster justice in an unjust world.

Indianapolis, IN, USA

Suzanne M. Coyle

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Our lives are enriched by many people through our hopes and dreams. This book has been made possible by many helpers along the journey.

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Looking at Spirituality, Supervision, and Training</b> . . . . .	1
	Self as Focus . . . . .	4
	Systems as Focus . . . . .	4
	Spirit as Focus . . . . .	5
	Case Vignette of Supervisee/Supervisor Diverse Relational Selves. . . . .	6
	Connecting Self, Systems, and Spirit in the Case Vignette. . . . .	7
	Using This Book . . . . .	8
	References. . . . .	10
<b>2</b>	<b>Spirituality in Contemporary Systemic Practice</b> . . . . .	11
	Importance of Religion and Spirituality in Americans' Lives . . . . .	11
	Development of Spirituality and Religion in Systemic Family Therapy . . . . .	12
	Distinctions Between Religion and Spirituality . . . . .	14
	Spirituality in Systemic Practice . . . . .	16
	Developing Spirituality in Clinical Practice . . . . .	18
	An Approach to Integrating Spirituality in Systemic Practice . . . . .	22
	Case Study . . . . .	24
	Uniqueness of Spirituality in Family Context. . . . .	25
	Case Study . . . . .	26
	Awareness of Spirituality Across Mental Health Disciplines . . . . .	28
	Movement Toward Method . . . . .	30
	Self, Systems, and Spirit Practice . . . . .	30
	What Is Spirituality? . . . . .	30
	References. . . . .	31
<b>3</b>	<b>Spirituality in a Thick Context of Diversity</b> . . . . .	35
	Spirituality's Connections to Culture and Diversity . . . . .	35
	Socially Transformative Practice in a Diverse Context . . . . .	39
	Implementing Socially Transformative Practices . . . . .	41

- Case Study ..... 42
- Moving to a Creative Approach for Spirituality and Diversity ..... 43
- Creating a Spirituality Diverse Model ..... 44
  - Case Study ..... 47
- Integrating Spirituality with Social Justice ..... 49
- Spirituality in Diversity Across Mental Health Disciplines ..... 50
- Self, Systems, Spirit Practice ..... 50
  - Diversity and Spirituality in the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality. . . 50
- References ..... 51
  
- 4 Methodological Considerations for Integrating Spirituality in Socially Just Systemic Training** ..... 55
  - Moving from Social Justice to Inclusivity ..... 55
  - Self in the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 57
  - Systems in the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 61
  - Spirit of the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 64
  - Reweaving of the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 66
  - Dynamic Description of the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 67
  - Applying the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 68
  - Finding Spirituality in Social Justice Across Mental Health Disciplines ..... 70
  - Self, Systems, and Spirit Practice ..... 70
    - Looking at the Living Web of Socio-Spirituality ..... 70
  - References ..... 71
  
- 5 Spirituality in Individual, Tandem, and Group Supervision** ..... 73
  - Challenges of Spirituality in Supervision ..... 73
  - Receptiveness to Spirituality in Supervision ..... 74
  - Current Approaches to Spirituality in Supervision ..... 75
  - Spirituality in Collective Narrative Practice Group Supervision ..... 81
  - Spiritual Integration Through Diversity in Supervision ..... 83
  - Model of Socio-Spirituality in Supervision ..... 85
  - Supervision Case Using a Socio-Spiritual Model ..... 88
  - Reflecting on the Supervisory Model of Socio-Spirituality ..... 90
  - Supervisory Model of Socio-Spirituality Across Mental Health Disciplines ..... 90
    - Self, Systems, Spirit Practice ..... 91
    - Seeking Socio-Spirituality in Supervision ..... 91
  - References ..... 91
  
- 6 Spirituality in a Systemic Family Therapy Curriculum** ..... 95
  - Movement Toward MFT Training and Spirituality ..... 95
  - Standardization of Best Practices ..... 96
  - Foundations of MFT Core Competencies, COAMFTE Standards, and AMFTRB Domains for Curriculum MFT Competency and Accreditation Standards ..... 97
  - Need for Spirituality in MFT Training ..... 99

- Spiritual Competencies . . . . . 103
- Overview of a Spiritually Integrated MFT Program . . . . . 104
- Courses in the Curriculum Focusing on Spiritual and Social Justice Integration . . . . . 107
- Courses That Offer Multicultural and Larger Systems Awareness . . . . . 107
- Reflexive Learning Through Self-Awareness and Clinical Practice . . . . . 108
- Spirituality in Live Supervision Groups and Individual Supervision . . . . . 109
- Spirituality in the Capstone Presentation . . . . . 109
- Suggestions for Integrating Spirituality in an MFT Curriculum . . . . . 110
- Creating a Spiritually Integrative Curriculum Across Mental Health Disciplines . . . . . 110
- Self, Systems, Spirit Practice . . . . . 111
  - Creating a Spiritually Integrated Curriculum . . . . . 111
- References . . . . . 111
- 7 Creating a Spiritually Integrated Course in an MFT Program . . . . . 115**
  - Historical Background of Spirituality Courses . . . . . 115
  - Bridge to Integration of Spirituality Course . . . . . 116
  - Background Leading to Self, Systems, and Spirit Course . . . . . 117
  - Methodology of “Integration of Self, Systems, and Spirit” . . . . . 118
  - Course Objectives . . . . . 119
  - Didactic Reading and Writing Assignments . . . . . 119
  - Suggestions for Faith-Based MFT Programs . . . . . 120
    - Readings . . . . . 120
    - Reflection Papers . . . . . 121
    - Self of Therapist Paper . . . . . 121
    - Reflecting Teams . . . . . 121
    - Final Methodological Paper . . . . . 121
  - Suggestions for a Secular MFT Program . . . . . 121
  - Creating a Spiritually Integrated Course Across Mental Health Disciplines . . . . . 122
  - Self, Systems, Spirit Practice . . . . . 122
    - Discovering Creativity in Teaching Spirituality . . . . . 122
  - References . . . . . 123
- 8 Preliminary Research in the Integration of Spirituality and Systemic Family Therapy . . . . . 125**
  - Introduction . . . . . 125
  - Background: MFT Live Supervision Group on Spirituality . . . . . 126
    - Implementation of Re-storying Exercise in Live Supervision . . . . . 126
    - Live Supervision Process . . . . . 128
    - A Student’s Story . . . . . 129
  - Preliminary Research Study on Therapists’ Own Spiritual Narratives in Spring 2020 . . . . . 130
  - Pilot Project on Spiritual Interventions in Spring 2021 . . . . . 131
    - Purpose of the Study* . . . . . 132

*Description of the Project* . . . . . 132

*Procedures* . . . . . 133

*Results*. . . . . 135

*Implications*. . . . . 139

    Intern D Case Study . . . . . 140

    Spiritual Critique. . . . . 140

Adaptation to Secular Environments . . . . . 141

Spiritual Interventions Across Mental Health Disciplines . . . . . 141

Self, Systems, Spirit Practice . . . . . 142

    Possibilities for Further Research . . . . . 142

References. . . . . 142

**9 Expanding Spirituality to Community-Based Service Contexts** . . . 145

    Context for Socio-Spirituality in MFT Training. . . . . 145

    Collective Narrative Practice and Social Sustenance . . . . . 147

    Spirituality in Collective Narrative Practice . . . . . 150

    Tutu Center for Peace, Reconciliation, and Global Justice Project . . . . 152

    Local Engagement of MFT Students in Global Justice: “Hearing Our  
Voices—Marginalized People Affected by Poverty Speak Out” . . . . . 152

        Introduction. . . . . 152

        Collective Narrative Foundations . . . . . 154

        Foundational Approaches to Cultural Awareness . . . . . 154

        Selection Process for Tutu Project . . . . . 156

        Procedures. . . . . 157

        “Hearing Our Voices” Process at Community Center. . . . . 158

    Reflection on “Hearing Our Voices” . . . . . 160

    Follow-Up to the Social Justice Project . . . . . 160

    Implications for Other Programs’ Social Justice Community  
Projects . . . . . 161

    Community Spirituality Across Mental Health Disciplines . . . . . 163

    Self, Systems, Spirit Practice . . . . . 163

        Living Spiritually in Narrative Liturgy. . . . . 163

    References. . . . . 163

**10 Implications of Spirituality for Faith-Based and Secular  
Learning Environments** . . . . . 165

    External Training Options for MFTs . . . . . 165

    MFT Placements in Community Agencies . . . . . 166

    Alternate Group Experiences in Community Agencies . . . . . 168

    MFT Placements in Medical Settings. . . . . 171

    Alternate Placements in Medical Settings . . . . . 172

    MFT Placements in Religious Settings. . . . . 173

    Alternate Placements in Religious Settings . . . . . 174

    Future Possibilities . . . . . 175

Spirituality in Alternate Learning Environments Across Mental Health Disciplines. . . . . 176

Self, Systems, Spirit Practice . . . . . 176

    Situating Spirituality in Alternate Learning Environments . . . . . 176

References. . . . . 177

**11 Future Directions . . . . . 179**

    Spirituality Course in the MFT Program Curriculum. . . . . 179

    Spiritually Integrated Supervision . . . . . 181

    Expanded Research in Spiritually Integrated Systemic Family Therapy. . . . . 182

    Expanded Collaboration with Communities of Interest on Spiritually Integrated Systemic Family Therapy . . . . . 183

    Moving Forward . . . . . 183

    Future Directions Across Mental Health Disciplines . . . . . 184

    Final Words . . . . . 184

    Self, Systems, Spirit Practice . . . . . 185

        Future Directions for Spiritually Integrated Practice . . . . . 185

    References. . . . . 185

**Appendix A: Living Web of Socio-spirituality . . . . . 187**

**Appendix B: “Integration of Self, Systems, and Spirit” Syllabus. . . . . 193**

**Appendix C: Spirituality Integration Resources . . . . . 203**

**Appendix D: Self, Systems, and Spirit Practices . . . . . 209**

**Index. . . . . 217**

# List of Figures

Fig. 1.1 Basic integrative concepts . . . . . 8

Fig. 2.1 Living web of socio-spirituality basic foundation . . . . . 27

Fig. 3.1 Spirituality and diversity living web of socio-spirituality . . . . . 47

Fig. 4.1 Spirituality, diversity, narrative—living web of socio-spirituality . . . 67

Fig. 5.1 Socio-spirituality genogram. . . . . 80

Fig. 5.2 Supervisory model of living web of socio-spirituality. . . . . 88

# List of Tables

Table 5.1	Supervisory assessment—modified Hodge (2005) . . . . .	77
Table 5.2	Supervisory questions in a socio-spirituality model . . . . .	87
Table 6.1	Spiritual competencies . . . . .	105
Table 8.1	Re-storying spirituality exercise . . . . .	127
Table 8.2	Spirituality and self of therapist . . . . .	131
Table 8.3	Pre/post research questions for pilot research project . . . . .	133
Table 8.4	Questions for socio-spirituality interventions through self, systems, and spirit . . . . .	134
Table 8.5	Results . . . . .	135

## About the Author

**Suzanne M. Coyle** is an Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Marriage and Family Therapy at Christian Theological Seminary. She has been Program Director of the Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy program since 2004. The program has been COAMFTE accredited since 1994. In addition, she is an AAMFT Approved Supervisor. Other professional credentials include her licensure as a pastoral counselor and marriage and family therapist.

Coyle has worked in various clinical settings such as directing pastoral counseling centers, childcare agencies, private practice, and church pastorates. She holds standing as an ordained minister in the American Baptist Churches USA and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Her role as pastor in congregations in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana is the foundation for integrating spirituality in life.

She holds an M.Div. and a Ph.D. in Pastoral Theology and Communications at Princeton Theological Seminary. Coyle trained at the Ackerman Institute for the Family in New York City. She also holds a postgraduate Diploma in Narrative Therapy and Community Practice from the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia. In addition, Coyle has advanced training in narrative therapy from the Evanston Family Therapy Center and the Vancouver School of Narrative Therapy.

To expand her clinical interests in teaching, she completed the EFT Externship with Sue Johnson with further advanced EFT work in the Master Core Skills Training and additional supervision. She completed Level 1 and Level 2 in Gottman Method Couples Therapy. Her most recent clinical training focuses on Attachment Based Family Therapy.

Coyle's publishing interests focus on spiritual and systemic integration as well as liberative theologies and supervision and training. She has authored two books in addition to this book and several peer-reviewed journal articles and chapters. Coyle has presented nationally and internationally at the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, American Association of Pastoral Counselors, Society for Pastoral Theology, International Association for Family Therapy, and the Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration.

# Abbreviations

AACC	American Association of Christian Counselors
AAMFT	American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
AAPC	American Association of Pastoral Counselors
ACA	American Counseling Association
ACPE	Association for Clinical Pastoral Education
AMFTRB	Association of Marital and Family Therapy Regulatory Boards
APA	American Psychological Association
ASERVIC	Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling
COAMFTE	Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education
MAMFT	Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy
MFT	Marriage and Family Therapy
NASW	National Association of Social Workers

# Chapter 1

## Looking at Spirituality, Supervision, and Training



My personal experience in rural Kentucky emphasized the closeness of the community where someone was always available to look over you. Sometimes that oversight was comforting; sometimes it was intrusive. It could be said that close neighbors knew what you did even if you did not do it. So, my transition to the urban Northeast was quite a shock. Never had I experienced anonymity that was sometimes exhilarating and sometimes frightening.

Supervision in marriage and family therapy (MFT) training programs shares some similarities to living in a rural community. You have many people who are interested in your progress in life. The challenge becomes how to express that interest so that the individual does not experience intrusiveness or isolation. It is a tricky balancing act to determine the nature, progress, and extent of supervision and training for the MFT student.

Spirituality described in this book reflects the personal strength of individuals living in community. It focuses primarily on lifting people up from their own strength, with that strength expanded as they gain strength from others. This type of spirituality is typically non-theistic. Another perspective on the diversities of religion and spirituality is an increasingly popular approach that is related to spiritual fluidity. This approach is a combination of theistic and non-theistic approaches. Many people combine Buddhism with some form of Christianity for a spiritually fluid spirituality. Some of this approach is influenced by the growth of yoga and mindfulness practices (Bidwell, 2018). Several forms of yoga that are practiced today originate from Hinduism as well as Buddhism.

Also carrying over from my experience growing up on a farm is the notion that all life is imbued with spirituality. This book hopes to address that concern by lifting the importance of spirituality in all supervision and training. Yet our intent is to integrate spirituality with diversities to create an inclusive spirituality that is not limited to a personalized, internalized spirituality. This discussion expands spirituality to include everyday human concerns.

My personal experience influences how I see the ways in which supervision is inexplicably linked to spirituality. Perhaps one could argue that all the diversity concerns listed in Core Competency #1.2.1 in the MFT Core Competencies are related but separate.

The marriage and family therapy (MFT) core competencies were developed through a collaborative effort of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) and interested stakeholders. In addition to defining the domains of knowledge and requisite skills in each domain that comprise the practice of marriage and family therapy, the ultimate goal of the core competencies is to improve the quality of services delivered by marriage and family therapists (MFTs) (MFT Core Competencies, 2004, p. 1).<sup>1</sup>

This book argues that spirituality, when practiced in a non-oppressive way, is an umbrella that can link various diversities. Spirituality encompasses meaning that is larger than self and includes many diversities. It also links with who we are through the concept of self of the supervisor.

The core competencies that deal with diversity are as follows: “Recognize contextual and systemic dynamics (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status, culture/race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, spirituality, religion, larger systems, social context”) (MFT Core Competencies, 2004, p. 2). In the MFT literature, it is for the most part understood that diversities overlap in various ways through intersectionality. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) understands intersectionality as “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.”

Thus, the diversities identified in the core competencies can overlap in various ways. For example, an African American self-identified female lesbian living in a community impacted by poverty can experience the overlapping of gender, age, socioeconomic status, culture/race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation and how these experiences impact her life.<sup>2</sup> Her peer community at school can shun her. If she has a church, it may be that her church does not affirm LGBTQ<sup>3</sup> persons. At the same time, her church may affirm some aspects of her identity.

In a very different context, an aging, white heterosexual male with no family and scarce financial resources would experience intersectionality through age, socioeconomic status, and social context. The oppression he experienced would be less visible than the oppression faced by the African American female teen discussed

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<sup>1</sup>The reader can access the MFT Core Competencies at [https://www.aamft.org/Documents/COAMFTE/Accreditation%20Resources/MFT%20Core%20Competencies%20\(December%202004\).pdf](https://www.aamft.org/Documents/COAMFTE/Accreditation%20Resources/MFT%20Core%20Competencies%20(December%202004).pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Pronouns in case studies and elsewhere in this book align with the person’s gender self-identification. So, the majority of pronouns are traditional she/her and he/his. In other situations, the pronouns will be third person plural, as used by trans and fluid communities, such as they/them. The author supports this newer approach to using pronouns in the English language.

<sup>3</sup>Various identifiers are used for LGBT communities and their concerns. This book uses LGBTQ. This identifier does not exclude intersex and allies.

above. It would seem on one level that the urban teen would be more impacted by societal injustice than the white male. What we do not know is the level of intrapsychic and interpersonal distress that both the persons experience.

It could well be that the leveler for each of them is spirituality, and how that spirituality supports them against oppression. At this point, I would make my argument that spirituality conveys an idea more expansive and less restrictive than religion as identified in the MFT Core Competencies. Religion is understood as a system of beliefs that its adherents have followed, typically for one generation. Religion is understood to begin after two, three, or more people share a spiritual experience that they wish to carry forth. It then becomes codified.

Sometimes, this results in rigidity that people experience as oppressive and harmful. It is now not uncommon for people to talk about toxic religion. Systems of beliefs have acquired a “bad reputation.” Typically, religion is classified as described by the major world religions of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Confucianism. It is largely theistic, with the exceptions of Buddhism and Confucianism. Moreover, recent polls indicate a decrease in the number of people who are affiliated with or practice a formal religion in the United States (Gallup, 2021).

In contrast, spirituality is generally viewed as positive. At its extreme, spirituality becomes little more than a container for thoughts and feelings. With an absence of personal connection, little opportunity exists for connecting spirituality with diversity concerns. In many conversations, one might hear people discussing spirituality that seems quite close to emotionality. At times, the two overlap and even merge with each other. Spirituality may also convey a strictly non-theistic approach to life and meaning that can relate to some holistic spiritualities that embrace the physical, psychological, and social aspect of spirituality and health (Koenig, 2012). Some holistic spiritual practices might include yoga, meditation, centered prayer, mindfulness, traditional medicine with indigenous and Asian origins, and ecologically aware engagement. Combining these holistic practices in various ways will result in multiple types of spirituality.

Spirituality as understood here tries to weave a path between theistic and non-theistic spiritualities as experienced through the self of the therapist. This notion of spirituality focuses on the way in which therapists experience themselves as they work with clients. It understands that our own religion as therapists and supervisors can never overshadow the spirituality of our clients. And, at the same time, it understands that this spirituality may eventually be a window through which to view the client’s spirituality.

Yet for this book, the initial focus is on the therapist’s own spirituality as developed through careful supervision. MFT literature recognizes the importance of the ways in which the supervisor works with a supervisee to appropriately respond to the client’s spirituality. However, many of these approaches do not emphasize the way client’s stories contribute to their spirituality. The approach developed in this book emphasizes that a flexible and applicable approach to using spirituality in supervision starts with the therapist’s self of therapist and the ways in which this perspective overlaps with both the therapist and the client’s own perspectives.

Focusing on the client and supervisee's emerging spiritual stories has an expressive connection with their personal spiritual stories. In contrast, more traditional MFT spiritual assessments are objective and externalized often ignoring personal spiritual stories. To give further context, the focal areas of self, systems, and spirit will be discussed.

## **Self as Focus**

Supervisors who work with supervisees typically focus on the skills and training required to work with clients. Part of this supervision is assessing the theoretical model used to work with clients. Other components involve the client's presenting concerns and risk factors associated with the concerns. The treatment plan follows.

While the process of supervision varies from supervisor to supervisor, systemic family therapy supervision addresses self of therapist concerns. Through the self of therapist lens, the supervisor can work with the supervisee to understand better ways in which the supervisee's own personal worldview and experiences influence the work with clients.

It is from the self of the therapist that the supervisor can view deeper concerns the therapist has that can impact the work with clients. To what extent do the values that influence the supervisee create a helpful or not helpful environment for care of the client? And how does the supervisor's self of supervisor isomorphically influence working with the supervisee?

Sometimes, self of supervisee is understood primarily as being a container of developmental and psychological constructs that influence the growth of the therapist. Growth of the therapist, however, has barely any intrinsic spirituality in the literature. The view of this discussion maintains that the self of supervisee is indeed intrinsically spiritually interwoven with psychological and developmental understandings.

## **Systems as Focus**

Systems are the interlocking webs in which we live and interact with ourselves and others. They begin with the micro system of our families and expand to mezzo systems like our work environments and macro systems such as the legal systems in which we live. As the various systems develop and grow, intersectionalities emerge such as culture/race/ethnicity and sexism. Supervisees become increasingly aware of ways in which they are oppressed by these intersectionalities, as are their clients. At the same time, systems such as families, legal systems, health systems, and religion certainly can lend support.

Self of therapist concerns can be too readily understood as relating only to the individual therapist/supervisee. However, with a systemic perspective, we