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Children’s spiritual development in forced displacement: a human rights perspective

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This article provides a synthesis of current research and theories of spiritual development in forced displacement from a human rights perspective. Spirituality, understood as a cognitive-cultural construct, has shown positive impact on children’s development through both collective and individual processes and across ecological domains of the physical world, the community and the individual child. Findings support a human rights framework of spiritual development that privileges the child’s and the community’s own understandings of human development, and this framework may further serve as an important resource for scaffolding refugee children’s development. The study of spiritual development will enable more effective human rights protection of child development in situations of war and forced displacement.

Keywords: spiritual development; refugee; human rights; child development

Introduction

States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. (United Nations 1989, article 27[1])

Almost two decades after the recognition of the child’s right to a standard of living adequate for spiritual development, the international community remains largely uninformed of what this right entails developmentally or legally in the lives of children. Researchers have noted that violent displacement ‘affects the essence, the soul of the child’ and challenges the child’s understanding of a meaningful world (Simó-Algado et al. 2002, 208), and that intervention programs will remain incomplete until they actively address children’s spiritual needs (Garbarino 1996, 1998). The Convention’s explicit affirmation of spiritual development as a distinct human right is an important step forward, but the practical efficacy of this concept hinges on the ability of the international community to answer several fundamental questions: How is spiritual developmental to be conceptualized, and how may it be protected and implemented? What are the cognitive and cultural processes of spiritual development that allow children to develop an integrated understanding of self, others and the world in a meaningful way?

The experience of the refugee child offers a unique context to study both the potential and limitations of children’s spiritual development. Forced displacement has violently uprooted nearly 11 million childhoods, confining millions of children to warehousing in refugee camps or subsistence in rural areas and urban fringes (UNHCR 2007). Refugee children are regularly deprived of education, nutrition, freedom of movement, and family; exposed to infection and disease, military violence, poverty and trauma (Ager 1993; Harrell-Bond 2000; McCallin 1996), and their cognitive development may be impaired or delayed as a result of these experiences (Espino 1991; Kinzie et al. 2006; Wolff et al. 1995). From a legal perspective, the situation of
the refugee exposes a fundamental gap in human rights law requiring that research articulate refugee children’s rights in a comprehensive legal framework (McCallin 1991). From a developmental perspective, refugee children’s lives encompass a range of experiences—war, displacement, community disruption, poverty—that millions of children in the majority world face. Developmental research among refugees not only informs interventions among children affected by war and displacement, but also informs a more comprehensive understanding of child development that has been largely excluded in Western theory and research (Boyden and Mann 2000; Dawes 1994; Lustig et al. 2004).

Recent research has begun to explore the role of spirituality in affecting diverse dimensions of human development in forced displacement, from emotional and cognitive to social and political (Goździak and Shandy 2002). There is also an increasing recognition of children’s spiritual development in intervention programs worldwide sponsored by major aid organizations and foundations (de Berry et al. 2003; de Jong 2000; Ruwanpura et al. 2006; Save the Children USA 2004; Simó-Algado et al. 2002; Tolfree 1996; van de Put and Eisenbruch 2004; Wessells and Monteiro 2004). Although preliminary findings strongly suggest the positive role of spirituality in war-affected children’s development, the field of spiritual development is still emerging, and there is virtually no empirical attention to refugee children’s spiritual development. In this article, we synthesize extant research and theories to approach a more complete understanding of spiritual development—asking what this developmental process entails in the context of war and displacement, and how it may be protected as a positive human right for refugee children. We apply research findings within a human rights framework to illustrate the positive role of spiritual development—one that recognizes spiritual development as a central concern in human rights law and praxis aimed at protecting and promoting refugee children’s well-being.

A right to spiritual development

There is often confusion in the literature about the very definition of spirituality or spiritual development. In particular, fixation on the maladaptive potential of religiosity to incite violent discord often eclipses the adaptive potential of spirituality to promote human development in contexts of war and displacement (Scott 2003). In the Convention, however, spiritual development is seen as a positive right distinct from religious or spiritual freedom. It is viewed as a critical component of human development demanding rights protection, in articles relating to standard of living; access to information and material aimed at promotion of well-being; and protection from exploitation (United Nations 1989, articles 27, 17, 32). In contrast, religious freedom is separately mentioned in articles pertaining to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, tolerance among all peoples, and minority rights (United Nations 1989, articles 14, 29, 30). As Scott (2003) points out, ‘Religion is identified as a matter of mind, belief, and practice, part of cultural expression associated with minority rights and human equality. Spirituality is identified as an aspect of human development and overall health’ (p. 118). In development theory and practice, it is widely argued that human development includes spirituality as a distinct and irreducible empirical component of well-being (Alkire 2002). Clearly, religious freedom is conceptually and legally distinct from spiritual development, although the two may be realized simultaneously in promoting children’s development. In addition, it is important to recognize that protection of religious freedom falls under a larger category of conditions necessary for spiritual development.

Children’s spiritual rights are defined within the legal parameters of their ‘evolving capacities’ and ‘best interests’ (van Buuren 1994; Veerman and Sand 1999). Historically, children’s spiritual rights were informed by Western notions of childhood innocence and dependency, placing children’s spiritual ‘best interests’ in the hands of adult caretakers (van Buuren 1994).
The Convention challenged these assumptions by explicitly acknowledging children’s rights to determine their own beliefs in accordance with their ‘evolving capacities’ (United Nations 1989, article 14[2]), establishing children’s mental self-determination as a necessary precondition to their ‘best interests’. This view of childhood is consonant with that in many majority world cultures where childhood is a period of rights and duties, in addition to learning and play (Boyden and Mann 2000; McCallin 1991). Spiritual development is a ‘human right’ in the sense that children are entitled to a standard of living adequate for such development.

**Spiritual development in the refugee context**

A human rights framework for spiritual development requires an understanding of the developmental processes through which spirituality impacts children’s well-being in war and displacement. Such processes involve the acquisition and enrichment of an integrated understanding of self, others and the world in a meaningful manner (Hay and Nye 1998; Johnson and Boyatzis 2005). As conceptualized in Johnson and Boyatzis (2005)’s cognitive-cultural model, spirituality is ‘an integral part of normal, human cognitive-developmental mechanisms and processes … [depending] on culture … with intrinsic links between cognition, emotion, and value’ (pp. 212–13). Building on this model, we discuss refugee children’s spiritual development within an ecological system of spatial environment, community and the individual child (Brofenbrenner 1979).

**Physical and spatial environment**

Children begin to form a representation of their physical environments and of the human relationship to the ecosystem at an early age, which has important implications for development of self and values. On the most basic level, perceptual inputs from the environment inform children’s ‘ecological self’, orienting the self as embedded in the physical environment (Neisser 1988). As children develop schemas for organizing their social worlds, the home concept becomes an important anchor in the ‘social maps’ that inform children’s identity, sense of continuity, and perception of the world as a stable place (Garbarino and Kostelny 1996). Children’s understanding of the human interrelations with the ecosystem further impacts on their value systems (Phenice and Griffore 2003), and healthy cognitive and physical development requires that children actively engage in their environments through play, learning, work, and observation (Chawla 2002). The refugee child’s experience is especially concerned with ecological spaces of development, being chiefly defined by geographic displacement.

Spatial environments often determine the manner in which communities organize themselves and shape their spiritual cosmologies. Disruption of the geographic units of community home can be devastating for the social fabric of communities. Nevertheless, many refugee communities successfully reconstitute their cosmological and social patterns in new geographic spaces. For instance, Cambodian communities traditionally organize themselves into small intimate social units tied to ‘well-defined geographic sites’. Although refugee flight separated the communities from their traditional geographical identity, the collective remembrance of the old social order and cosmology served as a pillar of cultural continuity and Khmer identity in displacement (van de Put and Eisenbruch 2004). Similarly, the resilience of Somali refugee boys resettled in Canada was attributed to the maintenance of small group community units that had mimicked the traditional social-spatial arrangements of a nomadic, cattle-herding lifestyle in Somalia (Rousseau et al. 1998; cf. Boyden and Mann 2000).

Place also serves as an object of spiritual discourse. By ‘spiritualizing’ their spatial environments in the process of geographic displacement, communities create meaningful contexts for
daily experience. Ethnographic research highlights how refugee communities mobilize spirituality through rewriting scripts to relocate their spiritual ‘homes’, and through their constructions of collective identity, nationalism and the hope to return (Anand 2000; Gozdziak and Shandy 2002; Lubkemann 2002; Malkki 1995; McMichael 2002). Mayan refugees, for example, experienced the destruction and loss of their community spaces as an assault on their symbolic identity and ‘collective body’, and the burning of crops was experienced as a corporal assault on the people themselves (Lykes 1994; cf. Summerfield 1999). The community dealt with separation from spiritual landmarks by creating new cultural scripts, praying to mountain spirits for permission and blessing to cross the ranges during flight (Summerfield 1999). The ‘socio-spiritual worlds’ of Mozambican refugees—a spatial (rural and urban) and spiritual (living and dead spirits) concept—were disrupted through separation from the traditional places and social networks of spiritual belief (Lubkemann 2002). The communities reacted to estrangement from the old socio-spiritual worlds through reconstruction of spiritual narratives and new power structures in post-conflict resettlement. Also, Cambodian refugees anchor their notion of spiritual home to a physical birth place (described as ‘placenta’) and continue to explain their post-flight anxieties and depression as a function of magical or animistic processes involved in leaving their spiritual homeland (Eisenbruch 1997).

Importantly, refugee children actively participate in cultural discourses surrounding the spiritual meaning of home and place. For example, Central American refugee adolescents envision the homeland, the living diaspora, and deceased ancestors to coexist in continuous spiritual kinship with the land (Camino 1994). As one child recounted to researchers, ‘Campesinos are special with the land. It is like our mother. The land gives us life’ (p. 41). Spiritual thinking about physical places are also reflected in Palestinian children’s narratives focusing on the fruits and landscapes of the homeland (Farah 2005), and in Kosovar children’s idealization of the devastated homeland through spiritual metaphors in drawings and poems, such as springtime villages, silent rivers without children swimming, roads of sadness, and streets of hope (Simó-Algado et al. 2002).

While refugee children are often surrounded by social discourse focusing on the homeland, they may identify more with their current living spaces than their country of origin (de Berry et al. 2003), and they can be heavily affected by perceptions of their own and their community’s spiritual interrelatedness with physical environments. For example, Vietnamese refugee children conceived of their spatial environments in terms of spiritual quality, reporting that refugee camps satisfied physical needs but were devoid of ‘spiritual comfort’ (Loughry and Nghia 2000). Yugoslav children who were displaced showed significantly less emotional connectedness to their environment than non-displaced children, due to the feeling that they ‘did not belong’ to the new environment (Milosavljević and Turjačanin 2000). Spiritual spaces serve as an immediate environment for children to interact with their physical world, form new ‘home’ concepts, and practice activities associated with good mental and physical health, such as positive emotion, rest, meditation and reflection (Powell, Shahabi, and Thoresen 2003; cf. Crawford, O’Dougherty Wright and Masten 2005).

Spiritual spaces can further provide a safe place for collective expression of grief and emotional outlet in refugee crises, and the simple provision of a space to conduct spiritual practices and worship has proven beneficial in work with refugees in diverse contexts (Anand 2000; de Jong 2000; Dyregrov et al. 2002; Gozdziak 2002; Nguyen 2001; Tefferi 1996; Tolfree 1996; van de Put and Eisenbruch 2004). To name a few, Christian churches served as a place for emotional expression in intervention programs among unaccompanied refugee children from South Sudan (Tefferi 1996); religious pagodas were identified as a crucial resource for an intervention program among Cambodian refugees as spaces for community rehabilitation and spiritual counselling (van de Put and Eisenbruch 2004); and prayer rooms provided freedom to
worship and ‘palpable solace’ for Albanian Kosovar refugees resettling in the United States (Goździak 2002).

Thus, spatial environments form an important part of cultural spiritual systems, serving as spaces for spiritual expression, as meaningful contexts for daily life, and as symbolic objects of spiritual discourse. Spatial environments are interpreted as spiritually meaningful within refugee communities and mobilized in cultural narratives of history, present and future. Refugee children may cognitively organize their displacement experiences through cultural frameworks of spiritual meaning, and such spiritual constructions of place may inform the children’s understanding of human interrelatedness with the world and further serve an important role in children’s emotional expression and well-being.

Community context

Children’s spiritual development is scaffolded in the context of social networks and a larger framework of collective narratives and cultural reality (Johnson and Boyatzis 2005). Collective spiritual schemas used by communities to explain suffering and trauma are often picked up intuitively by children (Barrett 2000; Dull and Skokan 1995), and cultural meaning systems directly support child development in contexts of adversity by moderating the impact of harmful stress (Boyden and Mann 2000; Dawes 1994; Lustig et al. 2004). In forced displacement, collective spirituality may facilitate cultural adaptation, shared identity, and cohesive meaning systems and thus play an integral role in retaining effective cultural practices to support children’s development.

Much of spirituality’s relevance in the refugee context stems from its role in shared identity and experience. Spirituality has been shown to foster collective identity over time among diverse refugee communities (Anand 2000; Farah 2005; Gozdziak 2002; Krulfeld 1994; McMichael 2002; Nguyen 2001). In particular, spiritual beliefs in universal human suffering may directly promote and congeal community solidarity while protecting against personal isolation (Coker 2004; de Berry et al. 2003; Holtz 1998; Zarowsky 2004). For example, Sudanese refugee communities interpret their suffering through embodied metaphors laden with spiritual references, invoking a ‘culturally-constituted notion of self’ through the collective process of coping with existential crisis (Coker 2004). In Tibetan refugee communities, spiritual continuity is a primary contributor to the maintenance of cultural identity as well as an essential component of ‘authentic’ Tibetan identity in diaspora (Anand 2000; Mahmoudi 1992). Similarly, Cambodian communities rely on Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes the acceptance of fate, harmony, and family and community support, to provide the major cultural support for families in recovering from traumatic experience and reorganizing their lives in resettlement (Kinzie et al. 1986).

Furthermore, collective spirituality provides a shared framework of meaning that enables refugee communities to form a coherent response to their situation (Farah 2005; Goździak 2002; Goździak and Shandy 2002; Mbatha 1996; Tolfree 1996). Community discourses explaining histories of adversity, causes of persecution and oppression, and political ideologies are critical to the functioning of communities (Dawes 1994; Zarowsky 2004); and the ability to find an explanation for suffering that preserves a belief in the world as a ‘just and orderly place’ is associated with psychological resilience after war and displacement (Başoğlu et al. 2007). This has been observed among Tibetan refugees, for whom the Buddhist belief system contributed to psychological resilience by scaffolding an empowering locus of control and facilitating meaningful explanations of suffering (Holtz 1998). Spiritual meaning systems may also contribute to a community’s sense of coherence, that is, a ‘subjective sense of [the] world as comprehensive, manageable, and meaningful’ (Ying and Akutsu 1997, 135). Among Southeast Asian refugees, a sense of coherence contributed to psychological well-being over and above any other factor,
mediating relationships commonly considered central to the refugee experience (Ying and Akutsu 1997). Furthermore, spirituality serves a critical meaning-making function among diverse communities: Spiritually-based discourses of injustice and suffering provide a source of historical solidarity and hope for the collective future in Somali refugee communities (Zarowsky 2004); religious institutions among Palestinian and Tibetan refugee communities are heavily involved in mobilizing these groups towards collective goals for improving the future (Anand 2000; Farah 2005); and Kosovar refugee communities interpret their suffering within a religious context of Islamic spirituality (Goździak 2002).

Importantly, collective spirituality often forms the explicit framework for the community approach to fostering child well-being. Spiritual rituals and traditional healing methods have been found to effectively promote children’s psychosocial development in diverse cultural contexts (Ager 1996; Boyden and Mann 2000; de Berry et al. 2003; de Jong 2000; Green and Honwana 1999; Tolfree 1996; van de Put and Eisenbruch 2004; Wessells and Monteiro 2004). In Angolan communities, rituals are developed to heal children’s emotional wounds after war, and are combined with biomedical treatments to address children’s mental stress (Honwana 1998; Wessells and Monteiro 2004). Similar traditional practices among Acholi communities in Uganda are observed to support children’s sense of control and calm following soldiering experiences (Boyden and Mann 2000). Conceivably, the physical action sequences of healing rituals are rendered significant through the spiritual symbolism they embody and the emotional processes they facilitate, both for the individual child and the child’s relationship with the community (Wessells and Monteiro 2004). What is critical in spiritually based interventions is that they respond directly to cultural conceptions of suffering and well-being, and to the child’s own understanding of displacement.

Communities may deliberately cultivate children’s spirituality through teachings designed to help children meaningfully order their experiences and preserve moral and emotional wholeness. This is evidenced in Afghani refugees’ emphasis on moral and spiritual integrity as the most critical aspect of children’s development (de Berry et al. 2003). Tibetan Buddhist communities resettled in the United States also view their spiritual philosophy as the most effective protective mechanism for children’s mental health, as a Tibetan school director said:

You see our Tibetan mentality makes them feel integrated and gives them self-confidence. I think we don’t need external mental health care. The young and teenage children find self-confidence in their Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhist way of thinking, which prevents mental disease. (Ruwanpura et al. 2006, 193)

**The individual child**

Spiritual development is intimately linked to the developmental processes of self-understanding, emotion and meaning-making. Specifically, spirituality provides a sense of continuity in children’s self theories by instilling a sense of ‘personal history’ or a spiritual ‘story’ of the self (Dull and Skokan 1995; Lewis 1998; Bosacki 2001), and by enabling the ‘meaningful connection of self’ with the world outside individual experience (Johnson and Boyatzis 2005, 217). Spirituality is also closely related to children’s emotional development (Bosacki and Ota 2000; Johnson and Boyatzis 2005), being implicated in global cognitive-emotional systems of empathy (Mattis and Jagers 2001), ethical orientation (Hay and Socha 2005), and understandings of social justice and human rights (Mattis and Jagers 2001; Veerman and Sand 1999). Spiritual schemas further allow children to interpret events in a manner that inspires hope, a sense of control, and coherent organization of meaning (Dull and Skokan 1995; Garbarino 1996; Weaver et al. 2000). As a human right, spiritual development may play an important protective role for children in the contexts of war and displacement.
The self

Forced displacement challenges the child to formulate a coherent sense of self within a fragmented social world characterized by changing environments and new experiences (Summerfield 1995; Ager 1996). Ethnographic research on refugee children’s narratives suggests that children intuitively draw on spiritual resources to maintain a stable sense of self and explain how their self-concepts are tied to cultural histories. For example, refugee youth from Central America repeatedly affirm the sangre indigena (indigenous blood) as a linkage of social unity across space and time, which suggests a spiritual sense of self in dynamic relation to the diaspora (Camino 1994). For children of third-generation Palestinian refugees, the religious zeal idealized by the Intifada movement is seen as a context for self-definition (Farah 2005; Garbarino et. al. 1991). Palestinian refugee children draw on cultural discourses of spirituality to explain traumatic events in their writings, drawings and narratives (e.g., explaining death through martyrdom), and thus infuse their individual experiences with a shared cultural meaning (Farah 2005). Children also use spiritual frameworks to understand their future selves and goals: Palestinian children’s narratives often refer to the will of God in their future lives (Serhan and Tabari 2005); and Vietnamese refugee children’s narratives refer to the spiritual destiny of their people, which instils hope for their own individual futures (Loughry and Nghia 2000).

Refugee children’s spiritual understanding of the self may be particularly important in cultures where parents view spiritual development as an integral part of growing up and children learn to define their ‘selfness’ through a network of spiritual relationships (Sefa Dei 2002; de Berry et al. 2003). In refugee situations, the construction of a collective history and the articulation of the individual child’s place in this history often provide critical resources for identity and self-understanding (Chatty and Hundt 2005). Spiritual traditions reinforce children’s self-understanding, as seen in rituals symbolizing the rebirth of self after traumatic experience and welcoming the ‘new’ child into community networks (Honwana 1998; Green and Honwana 1999). Religious and spiritual institutions further provide instrumental resources for children’s self-understanding. As in the case of Palestinian refugees, faith and political activism serve as ‘mechanisms whereby children and young people make sense of their surroundings … [and] consolidate their sense of national identity and belonging’ (Chatty and Hundt 2005, 177). Thus, refugee children appear to build upon the spiritual components of cultural identity in constructing a theory of self, drawing on these frameworks to maintain a sense of self and identity continuity amid displacement.

Emotion

Spiritual scripts and rituals serve as systems for ‘capturing and expressing’ painful experience and fostering collective emotional expression, and thus may play an important role in refugee children’s coping with grief, trauma and worry (Lewis 1998; Summerfield 2000). Research in diverse cultural contexts has shown that refugee children often draw on spiritual narratives to deal with intense emotional events in culturally acceptable ways and connect their own private experience to collective understandings of suffering (Farah 2005; Garbarino et al. 1991; Simó-Algado et al. 2002; Zarowsky 2004). For example, spiritual discourses helped Kosovar children cope with traumatic experiences of death: ‘I know my friend before being shot by Serbians was able to see a light … and that now he is an angel of peace’ (Simó-Algado et al. 2002, 213). Similarly, Palestinian refugee children seek involvement in collective faith acts of ritual and prayer as a means of channelling and releasing difficult emotions and political frustrations (Chatty and Hundt 2005).

Intervention programs have further revealed hope and spirituality as an effective means of helping children process, express, and make sense of emotional experiences. Collective worship
is a natural healing resource encouraged by aid workers among unaccompanied Sudanese refugee children (Tefferi 1996). In an occupational therapy program among Kosovar survivors of war, children’s emotional expression was facilitated through spiritual understandings in natural contexts such as play and drawings (Simó-Algado et al. 2002). As children spontaneously engaged in spiritual expressions of emotion, the researchers documented a shift from personal isolation to connection with inner emotions and values as well as with the community and the larger world. A classroom-based intervention used expressive-behavioural group activities to increase hopefulness (i.e., ‘the fundamental importance of having a sense of meaning or purpose in life, and the sense of the value of a life lived strenuously in difficult circumstances’) among Palestinian refugee children, resulting in overall improvement in the children’s emotional functioning, as evidenced by their emotional arousal, peer relationships, and empathy and compassion (Save the Children USA 2004).

Value and meaning-making
The positive role of spirituality in individual development may revolve around cognitive mechanisms of causal attribution and explanation operating through culturally-constructed scripts (Ahearn and Athey 1991; Crawford et al. 2005; de Berry et al. 2003; Honwana 1998; McCallin 1996; Punamäki 1996; Simó-Algado et al. 2002; Tolfree 1996). Spirituality provides adaptive cognitive schemas that enable children to make meaning of chaos—for example, a young Kosovar child explained an innocent child’s murder by reasoning that Serbian soldiers simply had no spirits (Chatty and Hundt 2005; Simó-Algado et al. 2002). Spiritual meaning-making is found to contribute to resilience among refugee children in diverse cultural contexts (Ahearn et al. 1999; Chatty and Hundt 2005; de Berry et al. 2003; Farah 2005; Garbarino et al. 1991; Garbarino 1996; Mbatha 1996; Tolfree 1996). For example, the teachings of Buddhist spirituality, such as the concept of ancestral spirits, comforted orphaned Cambodian children during Khmer Rouge, providing the children with a sense of connection both to their dead families and to the living community (Garbarino et al. 1991). Tibetan refugee children, who never developed post-traumatic stress disorder or major depressive disorder, were found to hold strong spiritual beliefs that provide them with meaningful explanations for suffering within a framework of Buddhist spirituality (Servan-Shreiber et al. 1998). For these children, personal traumatic experiences were interpreted as instances of karmic debt being repaid so that they would be free to live happier future lives.

An important function of spiritual meaning-making may be implicated in the child’s locus of control, which is a primary mediator of traumatic stressors (Dull and Skokan 1995; Mahoney et al. 2005). In refugee situations where children are unable to control events, spiritual meaning systems may be critical coping strategies alternative to withdrawal or emotional inhibition (Lustig et al. 2004; Paardekooper et al. 1999). By providing meaningful explanations for events, spirituality may scaffold both external (e.g., God’s intervention) and internal (e.g., prayer to God to achieve goals) loci of control, adaptive to the nature of the event. Among adult Yugoslav survivors of war and displacement, the sense of control over life associated with religious belief was one of the most significant mediators of psychological well-being (Basoglu et al. 2007). Yugoslav child survivors of war reported reliance on religion and fatalism as one of the primary cognitive coping strategies in response to the perceived uncontrollability of their worst war experiences (Duraković-Belko 2000). In refugee camp situations where life is institutionally regulated and children have little personal agency, children often mobilize prayer as one of their most important coping mechanisms, practicing faith-based strategies at significantly higher rates than a comparison group (Paardekooper et al. 1999). Similarly, Palestinian children living in the Gaza strip identify spiritual coping as one of their most important resources for dealing with events perceived to be beyond their control (MacMullin and Loughry 2000).
The important role of children’s own understandings of suffering in their psychological well-being is further evidenced by government-supported mental health programs for Southeast Asian refugee children resettled to American communities (de Monchy 1991). In these programs, attention to children’s spiritual interpretations of suffering is used to inform diagnoses, and traditional spiritual mechanisms of healing complement Western psychological models of treatment; an approach that has contributed to successful interventions for refugee children in diverse contexts (see van de Put and Eisenbruch 2004). The integration of traditional models of spirituality with Western models of human services indicates that these paradigms are not necessarily exclusive, and can and should be implemented simultaneously to support refugee children’s development in a manner that effectively attends to cultural orientations and children’s own understandings of trauma (de Monchy 1991; see also Pfund 2000).

Concluding remarks

Current research has revealed the important role of spiritual development as a positive human right in refugee children’s lives, which takes place within the ecological system of spatial environments, communities and the individual child. At its core, the right to spiritual development recognizes that children continually seek to make sense of their experiences and to understand their place within physical and social worlds, and that this cognitive-cultural process is implicated in children’s development of self-understanding, emotion, and value systems. Beginning at a young age, children actively incorporate spirituality into their understandings of the self and the world, and their spirituality provides a natural and relevant context for fostering psychological well-being and positive coping throughout childhood (Levine 1999; Johnson and Boyatzis 2005). Spirituality may inform children’s metaphysical questions, but more importantly, it informs children’s understanding of the conflicts and questions in daily life, enriching an integrated and meaningful understanding of self, others and the world.

A human rights approach to spiritual development is essentially constructivist in two dimensions. First, spiritual development privileges the child’s and the community’s own understanding of human development, acknowledging that the process of becoming a competent member of the society is socially and culturally constructed through individual cognition. Second, spiritual development recognizes that international law only gains authority through its capacity to scaffold those aspects of human development important to the individuals and communities themselves. This provides essential space for local autonomy within international law and human rights praxis that is often neglected among refugee populations (Shandy and Goździak 2000). Thus, within a human rights framework of spiritual development, the child’s construction of meaning is central to his or her own development, and cultural understandings of what it means to be human are central to human rights law and praxis (Dawes 1994; Ager 1996).

Notably, many important questions necessary for a human rights framework of spiritual development remain largely unanswered. In particular, at what point do children begin to comprehend cultural forms of spirituality and engage these cultural forms in their own cognitive well-being? What developmental benchmarks determine when children are capable of exercising their right to spiritual development autonomously? How may legal frameworks fully account for the social-cultural context of children’s spiritual development within the tradition of individual rights (Hay 2001; Lerner 2002)? Further, how may children’s spiritual development be promoted as a positive developmental right, beyond protection from religious persecution or spiritual intolerance?

An important theoretical limitation concerns the uniqueness of spiritual development as a legal or developmental construct. Current literature emphasizes the interaction of spiritual development with cognitive, emotional, cultural and ecological processes. Given the diversity of
processes falling under the term ‘spirituality’, can spiritual development be considered an independent construct theoretically (as a distinct developmental process), practically (in the daily reality of refugee children) and legally (as a separate human right)? In addition, the collective process of spirituality at the cultural level may be sufficiently distinct from the cognitive process of spirituality at the individual level such that the two should be considered as qualitatively different and yet related constructs. A human rights framework of spiritual development must articulate whether spirituality is ‘larger than the sum of its parts’, and how it may be realized as both a cultural and individual process (Scott 2003; Mahoney et al. 2005).

It is beyond the scope of this article to review the body of research on religiosity and relevant coping generally (see Hood et al. 1996), although such research should inform further inquiries of spiritual development. It is also important to note that most data available on spiritual development are from ethnographic and descriptive research, and many studies face methodological limitations stemming from the use of Western models with limited validity in non-Western settings (Lustig et al. 2004; Chatty et al. 2005). In addition, variables such as age, gender, education and nationality may limit generalization of the findings and caution against sweeping cross-cultural assertions (Ager 1996; Dawes 1994; Lustig et al. 2004). Lastly, spirituality is frequently used as a post-hoc explanation of successful coping with traumatic experience; these suggestive correlations cannot explain the mechanisms and causal processes at work. Future research should be broadened to include the social, cognitive and emotional processes of spirituality in both individuals and communities, aiming at the establishment of a comprehensive theory of spiritual development in a variety of contexts (Goździak and Shandy 2002).

In conclusion, spirituality is an integral component of human development and an irreducible component of human rights law. This compels the international community to move toward an effective framework of the child’s right to spiritual development, both practically and theoretically (Alkire 2002). A paradigm shift in research and policy must recognize spirituality as ‘the foundation for understanding and responding to the suffering of refugees’ (Goździak and Shandy 2002, 131); and include the ‘spiritual dimension … on a universal level into international humanitarian law and action’ (Veuthey 2002, 89). By privileging the child’s own meaningful constructions of self, others and the world embedded in cultural context, spiritual development may constitute a highly effective cross-cultural model for understanding child development in war and forced displacement. Future research should combine cognitive, cultural, and legal perspectives to systematically examine the theoretical construct of spiritual development and its practical implications as a human right in children’s lives.

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