Ethical Integration of Religion and Spirituality in Sport Social Work Practicum Education: Outcomes of a Field Instructor Training Initiative

Philip Breitenbucher
California Baptist University

Jerri Middleton
California Baptist University

Emilio R. Bermejo
California Baptist University

Ed Garrett
California Baptist University

Sport social work is a rapidly emerging area of practice that presents distinct ethical and contextual challenges, particularly within practicum education. Religion and spirituality (R/S) are frequently present in sport environments and are recognized within social work ethical standards as salient dimensions of culturally responsive practice; however, field instructors often report limited preparation for supervising students around ethically complex R/S-related issues in sport settings. This study examines the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative designed to support the ethical integration of R/S within sport social work practicum education. Using a quantitative pretest–posttest design, data were collected from 49 field instructors, preceptors, and supervisors overseeing students in sport-related or sport-adjacent placements. The training focused on ethical decision-making, culturally responsive supervision, and practical supervisory strategies to address R/S in sport contexts. Paired samples t-tests indicated statistically significant improvements in participants' self-reported knowledge, comfort, and perceived capacity to guide students in navigating faith-related issues within sport-based practice settings. Findings suggest that ethical engagement with R/S in sport social work is a teachable and developable supervisory competence, independent of supervisors' personal spiritual or religious identification. Implications for sport social work field education, supervision, and professional training are discussed.

Key Words: Practicum Education, Spirituality, Religion, Ethical Standards, Social Work Practice

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The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative designed to support the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) within sport social work practicum education. Situated within the growing field of sport social work and grounded in professional ethical standards, this study responds to a documented gap in field instructor preparation for supervising students on spiritually relevant issues in sport contexts. Using a quantitative pretest–posttest design, the study evaluates whether participation in a structured, evidence-informed training workshop is associated with changes in field instructors' knowledge of ethical R/S integration, comfort addressing R/S in supervision, and perceived capacity to guide students in navigating faith-related issues within sport-based practice settings. By centering on field instruction and supervision as a critical opportunity for ethical competence development, this study provides empirical evidence for sport social work scholarship and offers practice-relevant insights for strengthening field education in ethically complex sport environments.

Introduction

Sport social work has emerged as a distinct and rapidly developing area of social work practice, addressing the complex psychosocial, organizational, and cultural dynamics inherent in sport and athletic environments (Beasley et al., 2021; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2021, 2022). Social workers increasingly operate in professional, collegiate, community, and youth sport settings, supporting athletes and organizations around issues such as mental health, identity development, trauma exposure, injury recovery, and performance pressure. As this field expands, scholars have emphasized the need for workforce development strategies that prepare practitioners to address the ethical and contextual complexities of sport-based practice (Bates & Kratz, 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Gill, 2008).

Field education, identified by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as the profession's signature pedagogy, plays a critical role in this preparation process (CSWE, 2015, 2022). Within sport contexts, practicum placements expose students to organizational cultures shaped by performance imperatives, power hierarchies, and diverse identity expressions. Among these identity domains, religion and spirituality (R/S) represent a particularly salient yet under-addressed dimension.

In contemporary scholarship, spirituality is commonly defined as the pursuit of meaning, purpose, and connection to a transcendent or sacred reality, which may or may not be expressed through organized religion (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). Religion is defined as "beliefs, behaviors, and organized structures related to supernatural beings or moral forces" (Liu et al, 2025, p.3594). In contrast, atheism and agnosticism reflect alternative epistemological frameworks grounded in empirical rationalism or uncertainty about the existence of the transcendent (APA, 2020; Bullivant & Ruse, 2018). These distinctions are critical in sport social work because athletes and practitioners operate across diverse belief systems that shape meaning-making, coping, and identity. In this study, the authors use the terms religion and spirituality interchangeably to avoid confusion.

The literature suggests growing interest in R/S in sports. Shirvani (2025) and colleagues found that the number of published sports psychology articles examining the relationship

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between R/S in sports has grown from 10 in the first decade of the century (2000-2010) to 40 in the second decade (2011-2021). Religion and spirituality (R/S) represent ethically salient dimensions of practice that are frequently present in sport environments. Athletes and sport organizations often draw on spiritual beliefs, faith-based language, rituals, and moral frameworks to support meaning-making, coping, resilience, and identity formation (Morgan & Minton, 2021).

One common manifestation is pre-competition prayer, defined as the intentional communication with a higher power before athletic participation to seek guidance, peace, confidence, strength, or support (e.g., an athlete offering a brief prayer for composure, focus, and safety before competition). Such practices, along with broader spiritual routines (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, meditation, or reflection), can help athletes regulate emotions, manage stress, and enhance attentional focus prior to performance. Research suggests these practices function as faith-based coping strategies that reduce anxiety, enhance emotional regulation, and promote readiness for competition (Shirvani et al., 2024; Kruk & Abdol-Enein, 2024). More broadly, prayer, meditation, and faith-based rituals may operate similarly to psychological skills training by reinforcing cognitive consistency, self-efficacy, and perceived control in high-pressure environments (Hagan, 2021).

R/S also influences how athletes interpret their experiences through faith-informed interpretations, defined as the process of understanding success, failure, injury, and adversity through a religious or spiritual lens (e.g., viewing challenges as opportunities for growth, character development, or spiritual learning). These perspectives provide a framework for meaning-making, allowing athletes to situate performance outcomes within a broader sense of purpose and transcendence (Shirvani et al., 2024). Research indicates that religious coping and spiritually grounded meaning-making support positive cognitive reappraisal, resilience, and emotional recovery following stress (Noh et al., 2023). Consequently, athletes who engage in faith-based meaning-making may approach competition as an opportunity for growth and perseverance rather than solely as an outcome-based endeavor, thereby contributing to enhanced psychological well-being and adaptive coping. Religious beliefs may also influence athletic participation and performance, as seen in cases such as Muslim athletes competing during Ramadan, where fasting creates physiological and scheduling challenges that intersect with performance demands.

Despite this prevalence, ethical training for integrating R/S into social work practice remains limited, particularly in field education (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018). Field instructors often report discomfort navigating R/S-related issues, especially in secular sport environments where spiritual expression may be both visible and institutionally constrained (Aten & Hernandez, 2004; Oxhandler et al., 2024). This creates a gap between professional ethical mandates, which emphasize culturally responsive practice, inclusive of spirituality, and actual supervision practices in sport settings.

This study responds to that gap by examining the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative designed to support the ethical integration of R/S within sport social work practicum education. By focusing on field supervision within the broader historical and sociocultural intersections of religion, sport, and social work, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how field education can prepare practitioners for ethically complex, spiritually informed practice environments.

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Literature Review

Sport Social Work as a Growing Field of Practice

Sport social work has emerged over the past decade as a distinct and rapidly expanding area of social work practice and scholarship. Drawing on core social work domains such as mental health, trauma-informed care, community engagement, and systems-based intervention, sport social work addresses the complex psychosocial needs of athletes, families, teams, and sport organizations across the lifespan (Beasley et al., 2021, 2025; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2021, 2022). Practitioners work in diverse settings, including youth sport organizations, collegiate and professional athletics, military and adaptive sport programs, and community-based sport initiatives.

As interest in sport social work has grown, scholars and professional organizations have increasingly advocated for the development of intentional practicum and internship opportunities in sport settings (Beasley et al., 2021, 2025). Field education is widely recognized as the signature pedagogy of social work (CSWE, 2015, 2018), and the expansion of sport-based practice has created new demand for well-structured field placements that allow students to translate classroom learning into applied sport contexts. Recent publications emphasize that meaningful growth in sport social work as a discipline depends not only on curricular innovation, but also on the availability of competent field instructors who understand both social work competencies and the unique ethical, cultural, and organizational dynamics of sport environments (Bates & Kratz, 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Gill, 2008).

In response to this need, professional organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) have begun to outline best practices for sport-specific practicum placements, including guidance on supervision structures, competency development, and ethical boundaries in sport systems (ASWIS, 2023). Despite these advances, the rapid growth of sport social work has outpaced the development of standardized field instructor preparation models, leaving significant variation in the quality and focus of practicum experiences (Beasley et al., 2021, 2025).

Sport Social Work and the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Framework

Sport social work has developed as an interdisciplinary field grounded in holistic, person-in-environment perspectives (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Increasingly, scholars advocate for a biopsychosocial-spiritual framework, recognizing spirituality as a core dimension of human functioning alongside biological, psychological, and social factors (Sumii, 2025). Within sport settings, this framework is particularly relevant given the intense emotional, identity-based, and existential challenges athletes face.

Research in sport psychology and sociology demonstrates that spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, and faith-based reflection, are commonly used to enhance performance, manage stress, and foster resilience (Brown et al., 2020; Lundqvist, 2020; Hagan, 2021). These practices often function analogously to evidence-based psychological interventions by promoting attentional control, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy.

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Religion, Sport, and Sociocultural Contexts

The relationship between religion and sport is historically complex. Initially characterized by tension, particularly within Christian traditions that viewed sport as morally suspect, this relationship evolved through movements such as Muscular Christianity, which reframed sport as a vehicle for moral development and discipline (Meyer, 2015; McLeod et al., 2018). Contemporary scholarship further suggests that sport may function in ways analogous to religion, fostering collective identity, ritual participation, and shared meaning (Shoemaker, 2026).

At the same time, religion in sport reflects broader social inequities and cultural dynamics. While Christianity maintains high visibility in Western sport contexts, minority faith groups often encounter structural barriers. For instance, Muslim athletes may navigate fasting requirements during Ramadan or face participation barriers related to modesty accommodations, particularly among female athletes (Youth Sport Trust, n.d.). These dynamics underscore the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive practice within sport social work.

Religion and Social Work: Historical Tensions and Ethical Considerations

Social work itself has roots in religious philanthropy but evolved toward secular, empirically grounded frameworks during professionalization (Mattison et al., 2000; Ressler, 2002). This transition produced enduring tensions between spiritual and scientific paradigms. Contemporary literature identifies two competing concerns: the risk of religious proselytization and the presence of a "secular bias" that may minimize clients' spiritual experiences as sources of resilience (Elsayed et al., 2022; Ressler, 2002).

Within social work education, these tensions are reflected in limited curricular attention to R/S, particularly in field supervision. Although the NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE standards emphasize the importance of addressing spirituality as part of cultural competence, many practitioners and supervisors report insufficient preparation in this domain (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018).

Field Education and Ethical Gaps in R/S Integration

High-quality field placements are essential to preparing competent social work practitioners, regardless of practice setting. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates that MSW students complete a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field education and demonstrate competence across core professional domains (CSWE, 2015). Field instructors play a pivotal role in this process by modeling ethical practice, facilitating reflective learning, and evaluating student competencies. Research consistently demonstrates that effective supervision and intentional training of field instructors are associated with stronger professional identity formation and practice readiness among students (Cleak, 2015; Matthieu et al., 2016; Shea, 2020).

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Within both generalist and specialized field settings, there is growing recognition that religion and spirituality (R/S) are integral dimensions of many clients' identities and lived experiences. The NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards explicitly call for culturally responsive practice that includes attention to clients' spiritual and religious beliefs. Empirical studies indicate that many clients wish for their R/S to be acknowledged and integrated into assessment and intervention when relevant (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018). However, social workers frequently report feeling underprepared to address R/S ethically and competently in practice settings, including field education.

This gap is particularly salient in sport contexts, where spirituality, meaning-making, ritual, and faith-based coping are commonly embedded in athletic culture. Research in psychology and sport science literature has documented the role of spiritual practices, such as mindfulness, prayer, and values-based reflection, in enhancing focus, managing stress, fostering resilience, and supporting athlete well-being (Brown et al., 2020; Lundqvist, 2020). Athletes may draw on spirituality to cope with injury, performance pressure, identity transitions, and burnout, making R/S an important consideration in holistic, person-in-environment practice.

For social work students placed in sport settings, integrating R/S raises complex ethical considerations. Practicing within largely secular institutions, students and supervisors must navigate boundaries related to value imposition, cultural humility, client self-determination, and professional roles. Without intentional guidance, field instructors may default to avoiding R/S altogether, despite evidence that such avoidance can undermine comprehensive assessment and culturally responsive practice (Sherwood, 2002). Consequently, quality field placements in sport social work must equip students to engage R/S ethically, critically, and in alignment with professional standards.

Ethical Training for R/S Integration: An Underexamined Area in Field Education

Although scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of R/S competence in social work practice, and many private Christian/religious schools of social work have added a 10th competency where social work students demonstrate faith integration, training in the ethical integration of R/S, particularly in field education, remains limited. Reviews of MSW curricula suggest that relatively few programs offer standalone courses on R/S, and when such content is included, it is often embedded superficially within broader diversity or culture courses (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018). Even fewer studies have examined how R/S is addressed in field supervision or how field instructors are trained to guide students in this domain.

The limited literature on supervision and R/S integration largely draws from psychology rather than social work. For example, Aten and Hernandez (2004) proposed a clinical supervision model for addressing religion in therapy, grounded in the Integrative Developmental Model (IDM). While this framework offers valuable conceptual tools, it has not been empirically tested in the social work field education context, nor does it fully address the distinct ethical mandates of social work supervision. Moreover, reliance on psychology-based models underscores the absence of social work–specific frameworks for field instructor training in R/S integration.

More broadly, research on field instructor training has focused on evidence-based practice, reflective supervision, and supervisory relationships, with minimal attention to

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spirituality or faith-related competencies (Karpetis & Athanasiou, 2017; Matthieu et al., 2016; Shea, 2020). These studies consistently demonstrate that training improves supervisors' knowledge, attitudes, and satisfaction, yet few examine downstream effects on student learning outcomes or competency development. Even fewer consider how training prepares field instructors to navigate ethically complex domains such as R/S.

This gap raises significant ethical concerns. The NASW Code of Ethics requires social workers who function as educators and supervisors to practice within their areas of competence and to seek appropriate training when necessary (NASW, 2017). Placing students in practicum settings without adequately preparing field instructors to address R/S risks professional incompetence, undermines student learning, and may compromise client welfare. Despite these ethical stakes, empirical research linking field instructor training, ethical R/S integration, and student outcomes remain sparse.

Summary and Implications for the Current Study

Collectively, the literature establishes sport social work as a growing field that requires intentional, high-quality field placements; highlights the relevance of religion and spirituality to holistic social work practice, including in sport contexts; and reveals a critical gap in ethical training for R/S integration within field education. While calls for greater attention to spirituality in social work are well documented, little is known about how field instructors are prepared to supervise students in this area or how such training influences student competency development.

This gap is especially consequential in emerging practice areas such as sport social work, where supervisors may possess strong content expertise but limited formal preparation in social work supervision or ethical R/S integration. Addressing this gap through a targeted field instructor training initiative offers an opportunity to strengthen ethical supervision, enhance student learning, and contribute to the growing body of scholarship on sport, social work, and spiritually responsive practice. The current study seeks to address this underexamined area by situating a field instructor training initiative within the broader contexts of sport social work, field education, and ethical R/S integration.

Methods

Study Purpose and Design Rationale

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a targeted field instructor training initiative focused on the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) within sport social work practicum education. As identified in the literature, sport social work is a rapidly expanding field that relies heavily on high-quality field placements. However, empirical research examining how field instructors are prepared to address R/S in sport settings ethically remains sparse. To address this gap, the present study evaluated whether an evidence-informed training workshop could enhance field instructors' knowledge, comfort, and supervisory skills related to R/S integration in sport-based practice contexts.

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To address this gap, the present study evaluated whether an evidence-informed training workshop could enhance field instructors' knowledge, comfort, and supervisory skills related to R/S integration in sport-based practice contexts.

To guide this evaluation, the study was structured around the following research questions:

a. Does participation in a targeted field instructor training initiative increase field instructors' knowledge of ethical principles and frameworks for integrating religion and spirituality in sport social work practice?
b. Does participation in the training increase field instructors' comfort and confidence in addressing religion and spirituality in supervision and student development?
c. Does participation in the training enhance field instructors' perceived ability to provide supervision and field instruction related to faith integration in sport-based practicum settings?
d. Are training outcomes associated with participants' self-identified spirituality?

Given the applied focus of the training initiative and its implementation within real-world field education settings, a quantitative pretest–posttest design was employed. This design allowed for the assessment of changes in participants' self-reported competencies following participation in the training while aligning with prior social work education research evaluating training interventions for field instructors.

Training Initiative

The training initiative was delivered at a private Christian university as an interactive, evidence-informed workshop designed specifically for social work field instructors, including those who are supervising students in sport-related placements. The workshop emphasized ethical decision-making, culturally responsive practice, and supervisory competence consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards.

The training addressed three primary learning objectives:

1. **Increasing knowledge** of ethical principles and frameworks relevant to the integration of R/S in sport social work practice;
2. **Enhancing comfort and confidence** in addressing R/S-related topics in supervision and student development; and
3. **Building practical supervisory skills** to help students navigate faith-related issues within sport settings.

To achieve these objectives, the workshop incorporated multiple pedagogical strategies reflective of best practices in adult learning and field instructor education. These strategies included didactic instruction on ethical standards and emerging scholarship on spirituality in sport, facilitated small-group discussions using sport-specific case examples, supervised role-play exercises, and guided reflection activities. Participants also received written materials, including supervision prompts and decision-making tools, intended to support ongoing application of training concepts within practicum supervision.

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Participants

Participants in the study included 49 individuals who served as field instructors, preceptors, or supervisors for social work students placed in sport-related or sport-adjacent practicum settings. Of the participants, 74% (n = 36) identified as field instructors, 16% (n = 8) as preceptors, and 10% (n = 5) as holding other supervisory roles. The majority of participants identified as spiritual persons (86%, n = 42) which is operationally defined by their pursuit of existential meaning, personal growth, and a deeply felt connection to a transcendent dimension, sacred reality, or the broader cosmos (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013), 74% (n = 36) identified as Christian and 14% of participants did not identify as spiritual, such as atheists and agnostics, whose worldviews are rooted in empirical rationalism and distinct epistemological frameworks (Bullivant & Ruse, 2018).

Participation in the training and associated evaluation was voluntary. Nearly all participants (96%, n = 47) reported being very or somewhat satisfied with the training experience, indicating strong acceptability of the intervention within this professional group.

Data Collection and Measures

Data was collected using a training evaluation survey developed and administered through Qualtrics. Participants completed the survey at a single point in time, immediately following the intervention, using a retrospective post-then-pre design. This approach was specifically chosen to mitigate potential response shift bias, which can occur in traditional pre-post designs when participants' understanding of a construct (e.g., skill or knowledge level) changes as a result of the training (Geldhof et al, 2018). The retrospective method ensures that participants use the same post-intervention frame of reference when assessing both their current (post) and prior (pre) status. This approach enabled assessment of changes in participants' self-reported competencies resulting from the training intervention.

The survey measured three primary outcome domains aligned with the training objectives:

- **Knowledge** of ethical principles and frameworks for integrating R/S in social work practice;
- **Comfort and confidence** in addressing R/S topics in supervision and student development; and
- **Ability to provide supervision and field instruction** related to faith integration in sport social work settings.

Responses were recorded on continuous scales, allowing for quantitative analysis of pre–post differences across domains.

Statistical Analysis

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether significant differences existed between pretest and posttest scores across the three outcome domains. This statistical approach was selected due to the repeated-measures design, in which each participant served as their own control.

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The assumptions underlying paired t-tests were examined and met, including the continuity of dependent variables, approximate normal distribution of difference scores, relatedness of paired observations, and independence of difference scores across participants. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to assess the practical significance of observed changes.

In addition to overall pre–post comparisons, exploratory analyses examined whether outcomes differed based on participants' self-identified spirituality. No statistically significant differences were observed between participants who identified as spiritual and those who did not.

Results

Research Question 1

Does participation in the training increase field instructors' knowledge of ethical principles and frameworks for integrating religion and spirituality in sport social work practice?

A paired-samples t-test indicated a statistically significant increase in participants' self-reported knowledge following the training. Post-training knowledge scores ($M = 88.37$, $SD = 11.59$) were significantly higher than retrospective pre-training scores ($M = 71.91$, $SD = 22.94$), $t(48) = 6.28$, $p < .001$. The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = .90$), indicating substantial practical significance. These findings suggest that the training was associated with meaningful gains in participants' perceived knowledge of ethical R/S integration in sport social work contexts.

Research Question 2

Does participation in the training increase field instructors' comfort and confidence in addressing religion and spirituality in supervision and student development?

Results demonstrated a statistically significant increase in comfort following participation in the training. Post-training comfort scores ($M = 86.98$, $SD = 12.33$) were significantly higher than retrospective pre-training scores ($M = 74.93$, $SD = 23.28$), $t(48) = 4.21$, $p < .001$. The effect size was medium (Cohen's $d = .60$), indicating moderate practical significance. These results suggest that the training enhanced participants' comfort in navigating R/S-related topics within supervision and practice discussions.

Research Question 3

Does participation in the training enhance field instructors' perceived ability to provide supervision and field instruction related to faith integration in sport-based practicum settings?

A significant improvement was also observed in participants' perceived supervisory ability. Post-intervention scores ($M = 88.19$, $SD = 11.85$) were significantly higher than retrospective pre-intervention scores ($M = 72.42$, $SD = 23.42$), $t(48) = 7.07$, $p < .001$. The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = .97$), reflecting strong practical significance. These findings indicate that the training was associated with increased confidence in providing supervision related to faith integration within sport social work placements.

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Research Question 4

Are training outcomes associated with participants' self-identified spirituality?

Exploratory analyses examined whether changes in knowledge, comfort, or supervisory ability differed based on participants' self-identified spirituality. No statistically significant differences were observed between participants who identified as spiritual and those who did not. This finding suggests that the observed training effects were not contingent upon participants' personal spiritual identification.

Overall, findings across all research questions indicate that participation in the training initiative was associated with statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in field instructors' perceived competence in integrating religion and spirituality ethically into sport social work supervision.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles relevant to social work education research. Participation was voluntary, and all data were collected anonymously to protect participant confidentiality. The training emphasized ethical integration of R/S consistent with professional standards, reinforcing the study's alignment with the NASW Code of Ethics and the ethical responsibilities of social work educators and supervisors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a targeted field instructor training initiative could enhance knowledge, comfort, and supervisory capacity related to the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) within sport social work practicum education. Consistent with the study's aims and the gaps identified in the literature, findings indicate that participation in a brief, structured training was associated with statistically significant improvements across all three measured domains. These results offer meaningful contributions to emerging scholarship on sport social work, field education, and ethically grounded supervision.

Implications for Sport Social Work Field Education

The observed increases in field instructors' perceived knowledge, comfort, and supervisory ability suggest that ethical R/S integration is not merely a matter of individual disposition or personal belief, but rather a teachable and developable component of professional competence. This finding is particularly salient within sport social work contexts, where athletes frequently engage in spiritual meaning-making related to identity, performance, injury, and transition. Nevertheless, practice settings are often situated within secular or institutionally constrained environments.

Field instructors occupy a critical gatekeeping role in shaping how students navigate these complexities. Prior to training, supervisors may avoid R/S altogether due to uncertainty about ethical boundaries, risk of value imposition, or lack of institutional guidance. The training initiative described in this study appears to have provided participants with tools to move beyond

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avoidance toward more intentional, ethically grounded engagement. In doing so, the training addresses a persistent gap between the profession's endorsement of holistic, person-in-environment practice and the realities of field-based supervision in sport settings.

Additionally, the lack of differences based on supervisors' personal spirituality supports a key ethical principle: competence in R/S integration is professional rather than personal. This aligns with the historical evolution of social work, where the field has sought to balance respect for spirituality with commitment to scientific and ethical practice (Ressler, 2002). Effective supervision, therefore, does not require personal religious identification but rather the ability to engage clients' beliefs with cultural humility and ethical clarity.

These findings align with broader social work education literature demonstrating that targeted field instructor training enhances supervisory confidence and competence. However, this study extends that literature by demonstrating that similar gains are achievable in ethically complex domains, such as R/S integration, within emerging subspecialties, such as sport social work.

Ethical Integration of R/S in Sport Contexts

The lack of significant differences in outcomes across participants' self-identified spirituality suggests that training effects were not contingent on personal religious or spiritual identification. This finding reinforces the ethical framing of the training, which emphasized professional standards, cultural humility, and client self-determination rather than faith endorsement. For sport social work, where practitioners may serve athletes from diverse religious, spiritual, and secular backgrounds, this distinction is particularly important.

Ethical R/S integration in sport contexts requires supervisors to help students discern when spiritual content is clinically or contextually relevant; how to respond when athletes introduce faith-based concerns; and how to maintain appropriate professional boundaries within environments that may simultaneously valorize spirituality (e.g., pregame prayer, faith-based team culture) and restrict its explicit discussion. By increasing supervisors' comfort and skill in addressing these issues, the training initiative supports ethical practice consistent with NASW and CSWE standards.

Implications for Programs and Professional Organizations

Beyond individual supervisory competence, the findings highlight the need for broader structural and institutional support for ethical integration of faith in field education. Training initiatives like the one examined in this study should not be viewed as optional or ancillary, particularly as sport social work continues to expand within diverse and complex organizational settings. Schools of social work, field education offices, and professional organizations such as ASWIS may consider incorporating R/S-related supervision training into standard field instructor development offerings.

Additionally, the training model described in this study demonstrates potential for adaptability across practice settings beyond sport social work. While sport contexts present unique cultural dynamics, the ethical challenges associated with R/S integration are not exclusive

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to athletics, suggesting broader applicability of structured training approaches focused on supervision rather than direct practice alone.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the use of a single-group pretest–posttest design without a comparison group limits the ability to attribute observed changes solely to the training intervention. While significant improvements were observed, results should be interpreted as preliminary and exploratory.

Second, outcome variables were based on self-reported measures of knowledge, comfort, and supervisory ability. Although self-report is commonly used in training evaluation research, it does not capture behavioral change or actual supervisory practices. Future studies would benefit from incorporating observational data, supervisor–student dyadic assessments, or student-reported outcomes to better evaluate the impact of training on practicum experiences.

Third, the sample size was modest and drawn from a specific group of field instructors and preceptors supervising students attending a private Christian university. Additionally, the majority of participants identified as spiritual and Christian, which may limit generalizability to supervisors with more diverse religious, spiritual, or secular identities. Replication with larger and more diverse samples is needed to strengthen external validity.

Finally, the study assessed outcomes immediately following the training. Without longitudinal follow-up, it is unclear whether gains in knowledge, comfort, and supervisory ability are sustained over time or translate into long-term changes in practice. Future research should examine maintenance of training effects and their influence on student learning and client outcomes.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on sport social work by demonstrating that ethical R/S integration can be meaningfully addressed through intentional field instructor training. As sport social work continues to evolve, attention to ethically complex domains such as spirituality, particularly at the level of supervision, will be essential for preparing competent, culturally responsive practitioners. This study provides an initial, practice-informed foundation for expanding field instructor training models that align with the holistic values of the social work profession and the unique contexts of sport-based practice.

Practice Implications

The findings of this study have several important practice implications for sport social work practicum education, supervision, and workforce development. As sport social work continues to expand across youth, collegiate, professional, and community sport contexts, the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) represents a recurring yet under-addressed dimension of practice that directly affects student learning, client well-being, and organizational culture.

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Implications for Field Instructors and Supervisors

This study suggests that intentional training can meaningfully enhance field instructors' perceived knowledge, comfort, and supervisory capacity related to ethical R/S integration in sport settings. For field instructors, these findings underscore the importance of viewing R/S competence not as a personal belief issue, but as a component of professional supervision grounded in ethical standards, cultural humility, and client self-determination.

In practice, supervisors who receive formal training may be better equipped to help students:

- **Identify** when spiritual content is relevant to an athlete's presenting concerns.
- **Respond** appropriately when athletes initiate faith-related discussions.
- **Navigate** boundaries within sport environments that may simultaneously normalize and constrain spiritual expression.
- **Reflect** critically on their own values and assumptions to avoid value imposition.

Equipping field instructors with supervision-specific tools—such as structured reflection prompts, ethical decision-making frameworks, and sport-based case examples—may reduce avoidance of R/S topics and promote more holistic supervision consistent with person-in-environment practice.

Implications for Schools of Social Work and Field Education Programs

At the programmatic level, findings highlight the need for schools of social work to more intentionally support field instructors who supervise students in sport and sport-adjoining settings. Field education offices may consider incorporating ethical R/S integration into standard field instructor orientations, continuing education offerings, and practicum manuals, rather than treating spirituality as an optional or ancillary topic.

Embedding R/S-related supervision guidance into field education infrastructure can help standardize expectations across diverse placements and reduce instructors' uncertainty about ethical boundaries. This may be particularly important in sport settings, where organizational cultures, institutional policies, and client expectations regarding spirituality vary widely.

Additionally, these findings suggest that preparing supervisors to address R/S ethically may enhance overall practicum quality by strengthening reflective supervision practices, supporting student professional identity development, and aligning field instruction more closely with CSWE competencies and NASW ethical standards.

Implications for Sport Organizations and Professional Associations

Sport organizations that partner with social work programs may also benefit from recognizing the role of ethical R/S integration in supporting athlete well-being. When supervisors are adequately prepared, sport organizations may be better positioned to respond appropriately to athletes' faith-related concerns without conflating spiritual support with proselytization or informal religious counseling.

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Professional organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS) are well-positioned to support this work by developing field-instructor training resources, supervision guidelines, and continuing education opportunities that address ethical R/S integration in sport contexts. Such efforts could contribute to greater consistency in supervision practices and promote ethical clarity across an increasingly diverse range of sport social work settings.

Broader Practice Implications

Although this study focused on sport social work, its implications extend to other practice areas where R/S concerns are salient but often ethically complex, including healthcare, military, school-based, and correctional settings. The training model evaluated in this study suggests that supervision-focused approaches may offer a practical pathway for addressing R/S integration across practice domains without requiring extensive curriculum redesign.

By centering on ethical standards, supervision processes, and applied decision-making, this approach aligns with the applied orientation of sport social work and supports the profession's broader commitment to culturally responsive and holistic practice.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing field of sport social work by demonstrating that the ethical integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) can be effectively addressed through targeted field-instructor training. Positioned within the broader intersections of religion, sport, and social work, the findings underscore that spirituality is not a peripheral concern but a central dimension of athlete identity, coping, and well-being.

Historically, both social work and sport have navigated complex relationships with religion—marked by periods of conflict, adaptation, and integration. Contemporary practice reflects a convergence of these domains, recognizing spirituality as a meaningful component of holistic, person-in-environment frameworks. However, this convergence also introduces ethical challenges, particularly in pluralistic and institutionalized sport settings.

The results of this study suggest that structured training can equip field instructors to navigate these challenges with greater confidence and competence. Importantly, such competence is not dependent on personal belief systems but on adherence to professional ethical standards, including cultural humility, client self-determination, and avoidance of value imposition.

As social work in sport continues to expand, integrating R/S into field education represents a critical opportunity to strengthen supervision, enhance student learning, and promote inclusive, holistic practice. Future research should explore long-term impacts of training, including effects on student competencies, athlete outcomes, and organizational culture within sport settings.

Ultimately, advancing ethical R/S integration in sport social work requires continued attention to training, research, and interdisciplinary collaboration. By engaging thoughtfully with

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the intersections of faith, sport, and social work, the profession can better support diverse athlete populations and uphold its commitment to culturally responsive, ethically grounded practice.

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