Author's response to reviews

Title: "Taking Your Place at the Table": An Autoethnographic Study of Chaplains’ Participation on an Interdisciplinary Research Team

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Response to Reviewers’ Comments

Manuscript Title: "Taking Your Place at the Table": The Value of Chaplains as Integral Members of Interdisciplinary Research Teams

We greatly appreciate the reviewers’ time and effort in reviewing this manuscript. The reviewers provided thoughtful and detailed comments on our manuscript. We have revised the manuscript in an effort to address these comments and critiques as completely as possible. Responses to each of the reviewers’ comments and suggestions are detailed below.

Reviewer 1

1. General: This is a well conceived, well written, original, and interesting study that makes a real contribution to the palliative care literature as well as the chaplaincy and research literature in general. It is long and could be shortened by quite a lot. Some writing points are noted that need correction.

Response: We appreciate the positive feedback. We have shortened the manuscript substantially and have addressed the writing points as detailed below.

2. Abstract –
   Background: This section is unclear.
   Line 1: I think you mean ‘in transforming’ instead of ‘as it transforms’
   Line 3: I think you mean ‘or’ instead of the first ‘and’ and ‘or about’ instead of the second ‘and’
   Last two sentences: Reverse their order for a better flow. Conclusions:
   Second to last sentence: comma after ‘addition’
   Last sentence: omit ‘also’

Response: All of the suggested edits have been incorporated into the revised Abstract.

3. Background - Para 1 last sentence: Copy edit...space

Response: Done.

4. Methods - This whole section is long.

Response: Regarding the length, we removed specific details about Spiritual AIM’s conception and the model itself to condense this section; however, in order to address concerns raised by Reviewer 2, we also added more detail about autoethnography.

5. Methods - Para 1 one but last sentence: omit “after 20 years” till comma, or clarify that MS was providing supervision to chaplains in training. Better to omit.
Response: We agree and have omitted that part of the sentence.

6. Para 1 last sentence: omit or move these content areas till they are relevant? The reader gets hung up on why you came up with these as the three elements of core spiritual need and whether they are psychological etc.

Response: The reviewer’s comments led us to see that it is sufficient to reference the published paper on the Spiritual AIM model that that describes the model in detail (Shields et al). We also removed the paragraph that began “The primary goal of team meetings was to review transcripts.” We moved some of this content to the results and discussion sections of the paper. This paper is describing the methods for this autoethnographic study and not the methods for the Spiritual AIM study itself -- that information is being addressed in depth in a separate manuscript that is in preparation.

7. Methods - Para 2: Copy edits: Symposium needs to be plural; double period at end of the same sentence.

Response: Done.

8. Methods - Para 3. I think you don’t need the specific aims or Figure 1. Replace this with the content of Figure 2, which is relevant and necessary.

Response: We have made this change, and we agree that including the aims of the “parent” Spiritual AIM study was distracting to the aims and methods of this autoethnographic study.


Response: Edit made in this quote and also in other quotes where Spiritual AIM terminology is used.

10. Page 10, line 2: Sounds like it also improved the chaplains’ understanding of psychology or psychiatry terms and diagnostic categories.

Response: This is certainly an important point that we found to be true in our team’s work so we have incorporated this observation.

11. Page 13, quote first Chaplain 2 comment: ‘did’ should be capitalized.

Response: Done.

12. Page 14, middle para: I was getting into the idea that research involvement helps crystallize professional models of care for the lead teaching chaplains and that made sense. But then I lost you here. Can you shorten and clarify this fifth point?
Response: We moved the sentence about that began “With a greater understanding…” (to the “Contributions of the chaplain” section), so that the paragraph could stay with the point about research helping educators crystallize professional models of care and go on to discuss chaplain educators integrating a scientific outlook with their traditionally held focus on evaluation.

13. Page 21, last para: Complete the point that chaplains are trained to care for all faiths and none and so are trained in spirituality in its largeness and in its overlap with the other spheres.

Response: We clarified the beginning of this paragraph.

Reviewer 2

1. General Notes: In general, I think this is an important paper that begins to address the experience of chaplains in particular research settings. Its novelty makes it valuable for consideration re publishing, but the paper does require some tightening/rewriting, in my opinion.

Response: We appreciate the positive comments, and have addressed the reviewer’s specific concerns below.

2. Specifically, my primary rewrite recommendation [major compulsory revisions] concerns some methodological issues and writing issues related to the paper’s assumptions about what the discovered data actually says: namely that the authors appear to interpret more generalizable outcomes than the data from one small ethnographic study could suggest, in my opinion. Simply put, the paper overstates some of its conclusions (more details below) but that is correctable.... What is key is to explore the data more critically and closer to the experience – there is lots there... and I think can, taking into account real limitations in any small study, still raise important future questions and point in important and valuable directions. Thus, greater value will emerge if this paper is better contextualized; that is, that it remains with the actual “research” experience and plumbs it more deeply in that context, namely an experience of the actual chaplains (N=3) in a palliative care spirituality study.

Response: We understand the reviewer’s primary concern about overinterpretation of the data. We have rewritten both the Results and Discussion sections to indicate clearly the limited sample and narrow scope of this study, and have emphasized more strongly that the data are not necessarily generalizable, but rather represent our team’s experience.

We also have added extensive material in the Methods section to describe autoethnography more clearly, in order to place the findings described here in better context. We did not mean to suggest that the outcomes are generalizable to all chaplains and interdisciplinary research teams. To further correct this, we made edits in the first paragraph of Discussion “In our research study we found that…” rather than making wider claims about what the research suggest. We have clarified briefly in the
Background and Conclusion that this study is an example of one ethnographic study with three chaplains on one particularly interdisciplinary research team. This is an example of what we hope there will be more of in the field. This is not meant to speak conclusively for all chaplaincy and chaplains involved in research.

3. I would also recommend a more robust discussion section: many of the results/tensions in the text about these three chaplains in research are easily found in any lit search on the history of chaplaincy's varied and at times unclear identity on multidisciplinary teams. This is not new but it is interesting that the same narrative would emerge in this research context. I would recommend that the discussion section (2 mere pages) be developed, and the results section shortened (9 1/2 pages). I believe a more robust discussion of the findings would make this paper more interesting.

Response: We appreciate the reviewer’s point about the some of the challenges in IDT research mirrors that of clinical teams. We have added material about this in the Discussion.

As an autoethnographic, qualitative study, the Results section needs to provide sufficient examples of the themes that emerged in this analysis. (If the Editor requests a shorter Results section, we would be happy to make those edits).

4. Finally there are a couple of other key concerns addressed below:
(1) auto ethnography is research, and there is no indication this research study got REB approval. I am assuming the lack of documentation is just an oversight.
(2) while the parent study is mentioned, there is no citation that the primary study (Spiritual AIM study) was published (or will be published)... Since this research study figures prominently in the origin of this paper, I think the outcome/findings of that paper matter. And if the parent study was not publishable, was that on account of any of the tensions described in this second paper?

Response:
(1) The study was approved by the Committee on Human Research at UCSF (the ethics review committee), which included the participation of the chaplains as autoethnographic and ethnographic research participants. We have added explicit mention of this to the paper in the Methods section.
(2) We have published the details of the conceptual model (Spiritual AIM), whose articulation, description, and further refinement was one of the aims of the original (parent) study. There are, in addition, several manuscripts in various phases of preparation describing the main findings of the study, both quantitative and qualitative findings. A number of the key findings have been presented at the first annual “Caring for the Human Spirit Conference” sponsored by the HealthCare Chaplaincy in New York in April 2014. There is no sense in which the tensions described in the present autoethnography paper interfered with the publishability of our findings. We are simply busy and trying to make progress after funding has been completed and several team members have left the original site (UCSF).
5. Again, my recommendations below should not in any way diminish the important area this paper is exploring. I am very pleased to see the authors thinking about this issue. With some re-writing, this paper should find a way to be published.

Response: We deeply appreciate the encouragement and recognition of the reviewer regarding the importance of this area of research. We heartily agree!

6. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? [Major Compulsory Revisions] The scope of this paper’s question is too broad – the use of auto ethnography, as I understand it in this paper, is really about the experience of three chaplains on a research team with a specific spiritual care intervention in Palliative care as a focus – while it might raise questions (And recommendations) for chaplains being on other research teams and on research teams in general, this data collection seems way too specific (and preliminary) to be generalizable to chaplains on all research teams…. In other words, the data is about 3 chaplains participating in this particular chaplaincy related research issue in palliative care…. SEE:

Response: See response to Reviewer 2, Comment #2.

7. Line 8/9 on page one could be rewritten to be more precise: “the experience and impact of chaplains on an interdisciplinary team researching a spiritual care model in PC, as well as tensions….”

Response: We have made this change and added mention in the third sentence that this report reflects the experience of three chaplains.

8. See also page 5, line 17. (a team which is studying a spiritual care intervention)

Response: Done.

9. The title of the paper could use some revision (to be more specific) – more details below.

Response: Done.

10. A clearer focus could also better contextualize the “results” and conclusions section.
PT- reducing the analysis to this issue will make for a tighter paper.

Response: Please see response to Reviewer 2, Comment #3 above.

11. Pg, 18, line 17-18 – How does one study with an n=3 suggest that “chaplains have a key role to play on interdisciplinary research teams” ….? Is this only for research pertaining to spirituality in palliative care?
Response: We have revised this part of the Discussion to focus only on the results of this specific autoethnographic study.

12. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

(1) The methodology of auto ethnography is only basically described.

Response: As noted above, we have added more extensive explanation of autoethnography and how it was used in this study in the Methods section.

(2) [Minor essential revisions] It is not clear if this ethnographic study went to an REB? This is a concern generally where I am working (in Toronto, Canada) but I am not sure if this is a requirement of this journal. Did the research team know their comments were being analyzed for this purpose as well as the primary research study?

Response: We addressed this above, and made changes in the paper to clarify.

13. To put this consent issue another way --- This is a study that emerges as part of the process of the primary research study on AIM or in the language of the abstract “evolved” (page 3, line 11) from parent study. I am assuming there are two REB requests. [minor essential revisions] Also to this point ... The method given for the primary project (page 7, line 25) Page 5, line 16 --- indicates the data for this paper was sourced in “audio recording of the weekly team meetings” - I am assuming these are not separate from the primary study’s team meetings with the rest of the investigating team? This is not clear – on page 8, line 16, there is reference to the team meetings ... where the autoethnographers captured identity insights. (line 22) .. Also when there are citations (such as the one beginning on page 9, line 22) the data is from the larger team meeting... Standard practice would require consent from all the subjects, or at least a justification why one was not sought.

Response: We addressed the question about REB above (see Reviewer 2, Comment #4). Regarding the other comments from the reviewer on this point, we have removed unnecessary description of methods used in the parent study. We also clarified that any reference to “team meetings” refer both to 1) meetings held for the parent study and 2) the partial source of data for this auto-ethnographic study.

14. Are the data sound?

1) [minor essential revisions] The data in this case are themes and citations from the case reviews and memoing characteristic to autoethnographic process. There is little/inadequate discussion on exactly how the themes were found for this paper. For example: Whether a grounded theory approach was used for theming or some other method? And how exactly, by whom? (see for example Page 3, line 18 ... “documents were reviewed for this report”)
Response: The Methods section now describes the autoethnographic analytic used in this study in greater detail.

2) Prior to the limitations section, there is on page 15, line 22 reference to the chaplain participants were not meeting team expectations – they were too busy etc.... methodologically did anyone consider whether sitting in a room coding altogether (if this is what happened) might affect the findings?

Response: The description of the coding process for the parent study was a distraction. We have removed this segment of the manuscript and will address potential biases in other manuscripts that describe the findings of the parent Spiritual AIM study.

15. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation? N/A

Response: (No response needed).

16. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? As mentioned already, there is some question as to the applicability of the findings, in terms of generalizable conclusions. Again, in terms of limitations, the discussion section, page 18, line 17, over sells the KEY role --- in this case...there might be success for these three chaplains on this particular team... for this project, but is this true for chaplains on “interdisciplinary research teams” generally?

Response: We have modified the language where indicated to speak to what the three chaplains in this study added, rather than making broader claims about applicability. We have also added to the Discussion by explaining what was meant by applicability and generalizability from our perspective. We are working with an authoethnographic understanding of generalizability, i.e. “not in the traditional, social scientific meaning that stems from, and applies to, large random samples of respondents. In autoethnography, the focus of generalizability moves from respondents to readers, and is always being tested by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know; it is determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes.” (See references below, which are now included as References 20 and 21 in the revised manuscript).


17. This first paragraph (again page 18, line 17FF) reads like conclusions, with very little justification. The next paragraph, page 19 (line 1ff) is much better...

Response: Please see response to Reviewer 2, #11.
18. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

1) [minor essential revisions] I found the paragraph starting on page 14, line 6 difficult to follow --- how exactly does the model differ from psychosocial tools? And what does the CPE action/reflection tradition add here? It appeared like the authors were applying it to the research process and then in the last line, starting on line 20, there is a comment that the research method “does not seek out to evaluate or improve the work of the chaplain”. This dynamic (at play) probably needs a little more critical analysis...

**Response:** Please see response to Reviewer 1, Comment #12. We have edited this paragraph for clarity.

2) [minor essential revisions] And for the sake of achieving further clarification, did the fact that there was a “new comer” (page 15, line 1) to the AIM model at all compromise the way it was being implemented and studied in the research project? By this I mean, how was the intervention “controlled” to ensure consistency? And if there was significant variation, was this not also something to learn about research methodology?

This newcomer issue emerges again on page 17, line 17FF... how well did the shift from a tendency to engage in supervision move to a focus on research work? IF this was not done, this could confound the research process too. The citation (lines 29-38) does not offer much clarity on this dynamic.

**Response:** This comment reflects basic questions about the parent Spiritual AIM study. While we appreciate the reviewer’s concern, the observations that were made as part of this autoethnographic study stand on their own. The description of the chaplains’ experiences on the research team—including the tensions related to supervision—is important. We will address this and other relevant questions in the forthcoming manuscript that describes the main findings of the parent Spiritual AIM study.

3) [major compulsory revisions] In terms of balance and what the literature is saying.... See page 20, line 1 ff.... one of the contemporary debates is actually whether the work of the chaplain is unique and whether it can’t be done by others (Occupational Therapists, Social workers, Psychologists)? The authors make the point that “pc teams” “should include a chaplain” but what is the justification? And somewhat awkward is the last sentence in that paragraph – (page 20, line 6) what is the research/lit evidence that PC is exploring the unique contributions of each team member? (Some reference is called for here). My key point here is that a big part of the clinical spirituality debate (and the relevancy of having chaplains at all) seems focused on who needs to and who can offer that service? There is some conflicting literature on this question.

**Response:** We have added a reference from National Hospice and Palliative Care Association that speaks to the point about inclusion of chaplains in interdisciplinary teams. In addition, reference 10 is an extensive literature review
that includes sources that speak to explorations about the unique contributions of spiritual care provider team members.

4) [major compulsory revisions] Because I think this is an important paper (novelty wise and content wise), it would be my recommendation to be more selective in the results section, and engage in more critical analysis of some of these key issues in the discussion. What, for example, are the implications (page 19, line 8) of better understanding of chaplaincy roles on interdisciplinary teams? The reference to non chaplains not being “proficient” is interesting, but the authors must know this is precisely one of the challenges of contemporary spiritual care? Did this conversation come up? Is its inclusion here part of the insecurity of chaplains, or a testimony to specific skills? Another issue or way to think about this is why does a research approach/interaction open up better or improved interdisciplinary appreciation for “what chaplains do” than in their regular clinical work? The citation on page 10, line 8ff by the PI is telling, but one must wonder how well or not well-integrated chaplains have historically been on his/her psychiatric teams for every day clinical work. Perhaps, one of the implications is that the research project finally put a light on what chaplains do or do not do.... A more telling possibility is that chaplains have historically failed to offer serious or meaningful clinical interventions on the teams this PI directed?

Response: To the Reviewer’s question about chaplains “failed to offer serious or meaningful clinical interventions” – Please see response to Reviewer 2, #4, above. The analysis currently underway from the parent study indicates both qualitative and statistically significant findings about the chaplain’s impact. We now explicitly state that manuscripts with findings from that study are forthcoming.

We appreciate the Reviewer’s invitation for more critical analysis and have addressed some of the questions raised by the Reviewer in the Discussion section.

19. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? [major compulsory revisions] The limitations are cited on page 20, line 21ff. This limitation makes even clearer my primary point of critique/recommendation: the paper’s scope needs to be reduced, in my opinion.... To use the authors’ words: this research structure “limits the generalizability to other research teams and clinical settings.” (line 24/5) That is not the sense one gets from the title or most of the paper.

Response: The title has been revised. We have addressed the generalizability issue as described in Reviewer 2, Response #16.

20. [Minor essential revisions] In terms of BIAS – line 26(page 20) – there might be value in linking this to the critique and method of ethnography.... This is not a new challenge.
Response: The purpose of this manuscript is not to provide a comprehensive description or critique of ethnography. In the interest of space and the need to address the reviewer’s other comments, we have chosen not to critique ethnography in this manuscript, however, we have added more description of the analytic approach used (autoethnography) to the Methods section.

21. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
[Minor essential revisions] Page 6, line 5 – is this #9 reference in the endnotes to the published data from the from primary or parent report? This is not clear in the text? And it is not clear in that cited article either... see also page 3, line 13 where the project title is given... was this published?

Response: Please see response to Reviewer 2, Responses #4 and #14.

22. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
[major compulsory revisions] The title oversells the findings – it is only one experience on one research team – could this better be called a case study? Or make reference to the limited study? I believe the catchy phrase, with its obvious link to finding oneself at the theological and clinical research table, helpful, but the second part needs adjustment. Perhaps: An autoethnographic study of three chaplains at research...(?)
OR: A case study of Chaplains doing research (?) on spiritual care in palliative care
OR: A case study of the value of chaplains as part of a research team on Spiritual care in palliative care. OR: 3 chaplains researching spiritual care methods in PC...

Response: The title has been revised.

23. [major compulsory revisions] I think the Abstract also needs to be more specific in the background section about the specific project... this speaks to my overall concern about generalizability. The results section also needs to be more precise – page 3, line 23... “contributions to the research team concerning spiritual care interventions....”

Response: The title has been revised. We have addressed the generalizability issue as described in response to Reviewer 2, Response16.

24. Is the writing acceptable? In general, the writing is acceptable in terms of style; but as per my major concern, the text needs to be edited, and better focused on the particular but limited findings, and how these might or might not be generalizable. Sometimes there are statements that sound like conclusions but the data source is not clear. For ex: Page 5, line2.... Will research necessarily advance the profession? Or is this what is hoped by the discipline of spiritual care/chaplaincy? The point is that Research may or may not validate its methods? It can go both ways. And this was an articulated fear of at least one chaplain in the study. This issue emerges again at the end of the paper... which makes generalized statements (page 21, line 1/2). The ending, line 13, also sounds a bit too agenda driven... it feels like a call to action.
Response: We have addressed the generalizability issue as described in response to Reviewer 2, Response #16. We have revised the Discussion extensively to include the important concerns and questions posed by the reviewer regarding the potential of research to advance the field of chaplaincy.