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If a Holistic Approach to Social Work Requires Acknowledgement of Religion, What Does This Mean for Social Work Education?

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There is growing recognition that promoting wellbeing requires a holistic approach to social work practice which includes understanding the role of religion in the lives of service users. This is reflected in a number of mentions of religion in the new code of ethics produced by the Australian Association of Social Workers. However, any consideration of whether religion has a place in social work should not only occur at the individual level, but also consider faith-based agencies. This paper considers the implications of this for social work education in respect of developing curriculum which acknowledges the religious dimension of the lives of many service users; skill development to enable social workers to broach issues of religion with service users; and working in or with faith-based agencies.

Introduction

Social work has long prided itself on being a holistic profession interested in both the person and their environment, and considers a range of individual and contextual factors as contributing to wellbeing. As such, in addition to being concerned with ensuring essential resources for maintaining or regaining physical and mental health, as well as social and other opportunities, in recent years there has been a growing awareness of the necessity for social work practitioners to take account of the spiritual needs of service users (e.g. Canda and Furman, 1999; Lindsay, 2002; Nash and Stewart, 2002; Gale et al., 2007; Mathews, 2009; Crisp, 2010a; Holloway and Moss, 2010). While there are
spirituality ... is a personal choice ..., may or may not reflect religious beliefs. Moreover, it has been claimed that for many people spirituality is a far more preferable concept than religion:

A few people see very little difference between religion and spirituality. Most make a clear distinction. Religion tends to be associated with what is publicly available, such as churches, mosques, Bibles, prayer books, religious officials, weddings and funerals. It also regularly includes uncomfortable associations with boredom, narrow-mindedness and being out of date, as well as more disconcerting links with fanaticism, bigotry, cruelty and persecution. It seems that in many people's minds religion is firmly caught up in the cold brutalities of history.

Spirituality is almost always seen as much warmer, associated with love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery and personal devotions like prayer and meditation. (Hay and Nye, 2006, p. 19)

While not necessarily for the reasons outlined by Hay and Nye, there has nevertheless been a history of ambivalence towards religion within professional social work in countries such as Australia (see Crisp, 2010a, 2010b). It has thus been pleasing to see a small number of books emerging in recent years from British social work academics which have focused more specifically on issues associated with religion in social work practice (e.g. Moss, 2005; Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008; Furness and Gilligan, 2010) as there has been a tendency to ignore religion unless it is somewhat exotic or problematic, and even then it tends to be considered as an issue in which cultural competence is required rather than understanding a person's religion as a potential resource (cf. Furness and Gilligan, 2010). This is despite a growing body of literature which suggests that religious beliefs and practices can lead to enhanced wellbeing for some individuals and communities [for a summary of this literature see Lee and Newberg (2005)]. Furthermore, despite the fact that being a person's religious beliefs is one of the most common reasons for persecution (Hodge, 2007), the promotion of religious freedom has not been a priority within the profession even though social workers are expected to ensure that human rights for all are promoted.

Moreover, it has been claimed that failing to address religious dimensions results in unethical practice (Amato-von Hemert, 1994; Hodge, 2005) and legislative imperatives that human service providers take account of the religious and spiritual needs of service users are emerging in some countries (Moss, 2005).

In this paper I will be focusing particularly on the place of religion in social work practice and social work education rather than the relationship between spirituality and social work which, as previously indicated, has been covered by several authors in recent years. My interest in considering this topic arose out of my reading of recent publications. The first was Religion, Belief and Social Work: Making a Difference by British authors Sheila Furness and Philip Gilligan (2010). This book include
thought-provoking reflection by a social work manager who noted that the question of religion was never noted despite being one of the elements in the assessment framework which they were using. In raising this with a colleague she was told 'You know, unless a family is really strictly Muslim and it's obvious, the social workers aren't even asking, they're not even looking at it as a topic' (in Furness and Gilligan, 2010, p. 36). After raising this issue with other staff, it was clear that they were uncomfortable discussing religion with service users:

My social workers said, "Can we ask that?", I think that they thought that it was too intrusive to ask somebody about religion, but I said, "We talk about relationships, mum and dad, what kind of relationship do they have, do they have time together, do they have time as a couple? So if we're talking about really personal things, I think we're going to be okay if we ask them about religion". (In Furness and Gilligan, 2010, p. 37)

In Australia, where there is no state church, social workers sometimes call on notions such as the separation of church and state as justification for not discussing issues of religion with service users, particularly if their positions are government funded. Yet despite the existence of a state church and mandated questions about religion in widely used assessment frameworks, it would seem that English social workers are also reluctant to discuss issues of religion with service users.

While thinking about this question of whether social workers, including myself, found it easier to discuss many very personal issues but not religion, I found that in the 2010 revisions to its Code of Ethics, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) made far more references to religion than in its predecessor (AASW, 1999). In the previous code of ethics these were requirements to prevent discrimination on the basis of religion, the need for social workers to remain aware of conflicts of interest on the basis of religion and the need to be aware of their own religious values (AASW, 1999). While these remain, there are a number of additional areas in which religion is now being discussed including two clauses under the broad heading of 'Respect for human dignity and worth':

Social workers will respect others' beliefs, religious or spiritual world-views, values, culture, goals, needs and desires, as well as kinship and communal bonds, within a framework of social justice and human rights. (AASW, 2010, p. 17)

One manifestation of this respect is how social workers engage with religious individuals or organisations. Hence under a 'Commitment to practice competence' it has been proposed that:

When engaged in social work interventions that are influenced by their spiritual or religious world views, social workers will ensure that they do so in a competent, transparent and accountable manner, in accordance with the ethical standards outlined in this Code. (AASW, 2010, p. 22)

The questions which are being considered in the remainder of this paper concerning whether there is a place for religion in social work, the role of faith-based agencies and implications for social work education, first emerged from my reflections as an Australian social work educator. However, these appear to be questions which are
being considered by social workers in a number of countries and what follows is an attempt to answer these questions using the international literature.

Is There a Place for Religion in Social Work?

The inclusion of references to religion in the AASW’s new code of ethics seemingly presuppose that there is a place for religion in social work. However, in both Australia and elsewhere, this has been a topic for debate among social workers. Reservations about there being a place for religion in social work are frequently around religious values, and in particular where social work theory and values are dissimilar from religious ideals (Bowpitt, 2000). As Peter Gilbert, an English social worker has noted:

We are deeply ambivalent about religious groupings; when faith communities care for their own and dress respectfully, we laud their sense of civic responsibility; when difference becomes too acute, we accuse them of not integrating, and failing to become more “like us”—whatever that means. (Gilbert, 2007, p. 20)

Concerns about the involvement of religious organisations in social work provision have often been based on fears that vulnerable service users could readily be preyed on by workers driven more by religious zeal than the values of social work. There may be questions about whether staff have been hired more on the basis of their religious beliefs than their professional skills or knowledge and there may be justifiable fears of service users being discriminated against if they resist participation in activities with an explicitly religious focus (Tangenberg, 2005).

Religious viewpoints which have been aligned with oppressive practices, and which have reinforced, rather than challenged, social exclusion, further contributed to negative beliefs about religion among social workers (Moss, 2005). It is sometimes claimed that welfare reforms have at times been eroded by governments under pressure from right wing, conservative and often religious lobby groups (Vanderwoerd, 2006). Indeed religious discourses are often uncritically promoted within social work as being anti-women’s rights, unsupportive of women who wish to leave violent relationships, and associated with extreme religious militias, as well as unsupportive of programmes to alleviate poverty (Hodge, 2002). While such allegations may apply to some religious groups and organisations, there are also many organisations with a religious auspice which promote gender equality, run effective anti-poverty programmes and support women who do seek to move away from living in violent circumstances. Furthermore, there is a growing realisation that there are synergies between social work theory and some understandings of religion and spirituality (Dezeroskes, 2006).

Although it is possible to intellectually recognise points of convergence between religious values and social work theory and practice, individuals may choose to keep apart those aspects of their lives which they consider personal (i.e. religious beliefs) from their public or professional lives. This applies not only to service users but also to social workers who may have experienced undermining of their professional credibility by colleagues who consider any expression of religious beliefs as evidence of some form of psychopathology or resulted in suggestions that they are fundamentalists.
and unable to practise social work in an anti-oppressive manner (Gilligan, 2003). In some agencies, forbidding social workers from revealing anything of their religion goes beyond discussing their beliefs, to bans on clothing or jewellery which have religious symbolism. Hence it is with some interest that the recent draft of a new code of ethics for the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) states that

In carrying out their professional practice responsibilities, social workers are entitled to reciprocal rights, which include the right to ... hold cultural, religious or spiritual world views and for these to be acknowledged in the workplace and professional contexts to the extent that they do not impinge on the other guidelines in this Code. (AASW, 2010, p. 16)

Being afforded respect for their own religious and spiritual beliefs won't necessarily lead to a difference in how social workers practise. For example, although one survey of 123 graduate social work students in a public Midwestern US university revealed that more than four-fifths (82.9%) agreed that their spirituality was relevant in their professional lives, this didn't necessarily translate into their work with service users and very few claim they would encourage a service user to join or leave a religion (Rizer and McColley, 1996). Many social workers are conscious of the need to ensure they don't project their own religious beliefs and understandings onto those of service users (Gollnick, 2005) as doing so is likely to be interpreted as disrespecting a service user's rights to self-determination (Wagler-Martin, 2005). Hence actions such as praying with clients are typically deemed to be professionally inappropriate (Doel et al., 2009) although some social workers are known to do this.

The Role of Faith-Based Agencies

In countries like Australia, where church agencies are some of the largest employers of social workers (Camilleri and Winkworth, 2004), any serious consideration of the place of religion in social work leads to the question as to what is the role of faith-based agencies in service provision. The AASW's proposed Code of Ethics specifically notes a requirement for social workers to be respectful of faith-based agencies:

Social workers will recognise, acknowledge and remain sensitive to and respectful of the religious and spiritual world views of individuals, groups, communities and social networks, and the operations and missions of faith and spiritually-based organisations. (AASW, 2010, p. 18)

Until early in the twentieth century, there were very few welfare services in much of the Western world which were not provided by religious organisations and the theoretical underpinnings of the services they provided tended to be based on interpretations of religious teaching (Bowpitt, 1998; Canda and Furman, 1999; Graham, 2007). Nevertheless, this 'legacy has been the skeleton in the cupboard, something best forgotten and preferably ignored' (Bowpitt, 1998, p. 676). Despite a rapid growth of social work services in non-religious settings, such that in many places social work services are predominantly provided by secular agencies, religious groups continue to play a significant role in the provision of social work services and are entrenched in the
system of welfare provision (Vanderwoerd, 2006). For example, even though the major providers of social work services are local authorities, it has been estimated that more than 23,000 religious charitable organisations provide support and services to individual and communities within the United Kingdom (Fumess and Gilligan, 2010).

In what are sometimes termed ‘faith-based’ agencies, many agencies and programmes which are auspiced by churches or religious organisations often run at arms-length from overtly religious aspects of such bodies, and the notion of being a faith-based agency may be questionable (Melville and McDonald, 2006). This is particularly so when the work is largely funded by government, as there is usually some requirement that funded services will be made available to individuals who do not share the religious beliefs of the service provider, and that the funding per se is not for the propagation of the faith. In such agencies, there will not necessarily be any overt religious imagery on view and many of the social workers and other agency staff would not necessarily identify with the religion of their employer. Nevertheless, a religious ethos tends to underpin the broad aims and objectives of agencies with a religious auspice, although this may be termed more like an ‘imperative to care’ (Moss, 2002, p. 39) than in explicitly religious language.

One way in which this ‘imperative to care’ is realised in practice is that religious groups have often seen areas of need and established services, particularly to service the needs of the most disadvantaged in the community (Winkworth and Camilleri, 2004). For example, in the late nineteenth century, the Salvation Army is credited as establishing the first labour bureau open to all unemployed Australians as well as the world’s first programme for released prisoners (Salvation Army, 2010). The need for such services was eventually recognised by governments who either took over the running of or established their own services in these areas. Moving forward to the twenty-first century, church agencies continue to pioneer new forms of service delivery and are key providers of services to refugees, despite the fact that many refugees entering Australia do not identify with the major religious groupings in Australia.

In addition to being motivated by religious beliefs, it has been proposed that a second characteristic which distinguished faith-based organisations from their secular counterparts is the relationship with a religious constituency or group of stakeholders (Ferris, 2005). These groups have often have provided funding in the form of property, people, and finances over long periods of time and may be satisfied with providing needed services to the community purely on the basis of altruism. However, there may be tensions if some stakeholders believe that faith-based agencies have a right to impart their religious beliefs to service users. While some groups may make deliberate decisions to keep separate their religious and welfare arms, so that the latter might receive government funding (Goźdiak, 2002), others which work from a more explicit religious basis and have parts of their programmes with a strong religious focus have often opted not to receive public funding which would limit such activities (Tangenberg, 2005).

Implications for Social Work Education

Although Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession acknowledges the need for social work education to promote respect for different
religions and for social workers to have some knowledge as to the role religion plays in the lives of the service users of social work services (IASSW and IFSW, 2004), teaching about religion tends of be considered optional, or in other words not required, in many schools of social work (Furman et al., 2005). Consequently, the thinking which underpins the proposed changes to the AASW's code of ethics, as well as other recent writings on the interface between religion and social work, potentially poses a number of challenges for social work educators. In particular, I will focus on three key issues:

- curriculum which acknowledges the religious dimension of the lives of many service users;
- skill development to enable social workers to broach issues of religion with service users; and
- working in or with faith-based agencies.

Curriculum

One way of getting religion into the social work curriculum is to invite a university chaplain, or going beyond the university, to invite a hospital chaplain or some prominent religious educator to come and present a lecture or facilitate a workshop on the topic. Exposure to religious professionals can challenge stereotypes which students may have developed in the absence of any actual prior engagement with such individuals. However, not all of us have access to religious professionals who we would want to come and teach social work students. Moreover, some of us have experiences of university chaplains whose demeanour has been an antithesis to the values of tolerance for diversity which underpin our curricula (Tacey, 2003). Furthermore, in order to demonstrate how religion can be integrated into social work practice, there is arguably a strong case for input on religion to be taught by someone from within the profession (Crisp, 2009).

The possibility of having an elective unit focusing on religion and social work has been proposed by some (Sheridan et al., 1994) but a difficulty with this approach is that confining input on religion to an elective is likely to result in only students who already have an interest in religion, and are more likely to be sympathetic to religious ideas, enrolling in such a course of study. Such an approach also fails to recognise how frequently issues associated with religion emerge in social work practice with one study of social workers estimating that around one-third of all service users presented with issues in which religion or spirituality was potentially an issue (Sheridan et al., 1992). This is not surprising if the life events which bring some people into contact with social workers are the same life events which result in some people turning to religion (Ai, 2002). Hence a more authentic way of incorporating religion into the social work curriculum is for it to be one of the many characteristics or aspects of human life which are discussed across the curriculum (Ai, 2002). For example, in my own university we have sought to include exemplars or readings relating to rural social work and social work with indigenous Australians, in several units in our Bachelor of Social Work degree. Arguably a similar approach could be taken with religion, but in
doing so, it would be important to ensure that the material was appropriately embedded into the curriculum and not done in a tokenistic way which reinforces unhelpful stereotypes.

For many social work educators, the greatest hurdle in including mentions of religion in the curriculum is arguably our own inhibitions about discussing religion. This not only applies to those who are not religious or have little interest in religion, as reluctance to discuss religion in the professional context can readily be found among those of us who value the role of religion in our own lives (see also Lindsay, 2002; Holloway and Moss, 2010). Living in what has been described as ‘a deliberately secular nation’ (Breward, 1988, p. 99), it is not easy to discuss religious beliefs and practices without running the risk of wrath from students who are anti-religious, especially those who regard any non-negative mention of religion as some form of proselytising. Nor is it easy to discuss how religion can play a positive role in some people’s lives at a time when religious institutions are regularly in the news due to scandals such as abuse of children or when it is claimed that terrorist acts have been associated with fanatical or fundamentalist religious beliefs.

While not including discussion of matters associated with religion which might be more comfortable for many social work educators (Sheridan et al., 1994), issues such as promoting respect for religious beliefs other than one’s own, or understanding the place of religion in the lives of service users, risk being neglected in the curriculum.

Skill Development

It has been proposed that ‘service users need opportunities to discuss their religious and spiritual beliefs, and the strengths, difficulties and needs that arise from them’ (Furness and Gilligan, 2010, p. 44) in environments where they will not feel judged for the holding of religious or spiritual beliefs, particularly if these beliefs are not widely held in the community. Religious beliefs and practices can have many different functions, including facilitating connectedness, establishing a sense of identity, providing structures for quiet reflection, finding a sense of meaning or experiencing transcendence (Crisp, 2010a). Hence for social workers, knowing what an individual obtains or is seeking from their religion may be more important information than what a person’s religious beliefs are. In other words,

Rather than beginning by asking “what is wrong with this person”, we begin our questioning from a different perspective and ask different questions: “What gives this person’s life meaning?”, “What is it that keeps them going, even in the midst of their psychological pain and turmoil?”, “Where is this person’s primary source of value?”, “What can be done to enhance their being?”. In asking such questions, the person’s situation is reframed in a way that reveals hidden dimensions. (Swinton, 2001, p. 138)

Of course, there are many service users for whom religion is of no importance or of very limited importance, and in making a space in which people are enabled to discuss religion, also provide a sense of permission which allows them to decline speaking of this aspect of their lives. Nevertheless, a holistic assessment requires some
understanding of what really matters to people. While there are some situations in which social workers can get by with very limited information about service users and not compromise the service given, there are many situations when we should attempt to take account of what really matters for people. As one Canadian social worker suggests:

I say, I'm really interested in understanding what this means for you. And is there anything about your own cultural background, or what this means in your own community, that would be helpful for me to understand, because I may not know that. I'm not going to assume anything ... I'm going to wait and hear how it's been constructed in their lives. (In Clark, 2006)

Working in this way provides social workers with opportunities to open up discussion of issues, such as particular religions or religious practices, which they have limited or no knowledge of rather than demanding the social worker have expertise in knowledge. Whether or not such conversations result in explicit discussions about religion, any discussion about what is meaningful in people's lives will require social workers to have the skills and sensitivity needed to appropriately respond to issues which emerge. However, arguably this is a skill which a competent social worker has, whatever setting they are working in.

*Working with Faith-Based Agencies*

Although faith-based agencies are major providers of welfare services, this form of agency receives little or no mention in contemporary textbooks in the area of human service agencies (e.g., Hafford-Letchfield, 2009). While it could be debated whether or not students need specific input on faith-based agencies as part of their social work education, they nevertheless do need to be able to work effectively with organisations in which the aims, values and structures have arisen from a philosophical and value basis other than social work (Gardner, 2006). This may require working with other professions and/or volunteers (Angell, 2010). Even if not employed in faith-based agencies themselves, social workers must often interact with these agencies, particularly when universal provision of welfare services provided by the welfare state is lacking and faith-based agencies step in to fill residual needs (Edgarding and Pettersson, 2010; Pessi, 2010).

Social workers employed by faith-based agencies may observe or experience a number of tensions and need the analytical skills to determine their stance on these issues. These include whether the role of a faith-based agency is primarily to be a state-funded welfare agency or a critical voice speaking out on behalf of the most disadvantaged members of the society (Angell, 2010). While the former may allow for social work values to predominate, e.g. a faith-based foster care agency approving same-sex couples to act as foster parents despite the religious teachings of the agency's auspicing body (Furness and Gilligan, 2010), it can also lead to the silencing of criticisms against the state (Valasik, 2010). In faith-based agencies which have operated as *de facto* arms of the welfare state, there may be tensions if agencies are exploring ways in which the religious and spiritual values of the agency can be made
more explicit (Crisp, 2010a). Finally, working in a faith-based agency may challenge any division between one's personal religious beliefs and one's professional practice (Furness and Gilligan, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a case as to why promoting wellbeing requires a holistic approach to social work which includes an acknowledgement both of the role of religion in the lives of service users and the contribution of faith-based agencies to service provision, and considered the implications of this for social work education. The prevailing religious climate and predominant religions within a society, as well as the role of faith-based agencies in service provision, should undoubtedly influence how this occurs. There are no definitive blueprints but readers are nevertheless encouraged to consider if and how they currently incorporate religion into the social work curriculum and whether this is adequate.

References


