'It isn't discussed'. Religion, belief and practice teaching: missing components of cultural competence in social work education.

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Summary: This paper discusses the question of whether practice teachers and others involved in social work education are giving sufficient attention to assisting students to explore the potential significance of religion (or other identifiable sets of beliefs) to their practice, to their own 'worldview' and to the lives and perspectives of service users.

In doing so, it draws on direct experience and relevant literature, as well as semi-structured interviews with individual practice teachers and students and the results of a questionnaire.

The paper argues that, many practice teachers and others need to urgently review their practice with regard to the exploration of issues concerning religion and belief with students, if they are to become competent social workers..

Keywords: religion, belief, practice teaching, social work education, children.

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Introduction

Semi-structured interviews with practice teachers and DipSW students, during the winter of 2002-2003 sought to give individuals opportunities to explore how issues arising from religion and spirituality had been dealt with during their qualifying training and/ or their practice teaching of others. These pilot interviews soon suggested that, even amongst those who are explicitly sympathetic to religion and spirituality and who are aware of its potential significance to their own practice in social work, there is a pervading sense of these subjects being too dangerous, too personal, too embarrassing, too old-fashioned, too uncertain or just too difficult to discuss. Many appeared to mirror the 'safe' approach of New Labour's Alistair Campbell, who in blocking questions from a reporter to Tony Blair about religion announced, 'We don't do God.' (White, 2003)

Practice teachers, such as 'Richard' and 'Jasvinder' similarly suggested that they would remain 'pretty cautious' of raising such issues, unless students had already given them explicit permission to do so, or concluded simply, that 'It isn't discussed'.

Such an approach is, arguably, both unacceptable and unsustainable, in the context of the significant role played by religion and belief in the lives of many people and of the potentially significant impact social workers can have on those lives; especially those of 'looked after' children.

However, there is clearly an, as yet unresolved, confusion amongst many social workers and social work educators about what role discussion of religion and belief can play, in an apparently 'modern' and 'secular' age and more especially in the context of a commitment to anti-oppressive practice.

Fourteen years ago, Sanzenbach et al (1989), in the United States, emphasised that the relationship between social work and religion is, indeed, particularly complex. Sanzenbach noted that the historical influence of religion on social work has come from 'a *particular* religious orientation, not from religion in general', and that Christian fundamentalism is only one of several religious orientations, which can be seen as espousing views that stand in opposition to the values of social work. However, Canda responded by emphasising that, regardless of such conflicts, social workers will need to respond to a

variety of religious and spiritual needs and to understand a variety of religious and spiritual issues, if they are to be of service to people to whom religion and spirituality has significance.

In Britain, Patel et al (1998) emphasise that, for a large, and increasing, number of service users 'Religion is a basic aspect of human experience, both within and outside the context of religious institutions', while Modood et al (1997) report that 'religion is central in the self-definition of the majority of South Asian people'.

Of people questioned in the 2000 British social attitudes survey, 56% regarded themselves as belonging to a particular religion (Carvell, 2003), while the 2001 census reported over 75% of households in England and Wales as having a religion. Perhaps, even more significantly, the census also demonstrated that populations adhering to the larger minority religions are concentrated in particular localities and include very high proportions of individuals under 25 years; young people who appear to be actively maintaining and interpreting the cultural and religious values of their parents. (Anwar, 1998; Darr, 2001; Drury, 1996; Ghuman, 1999; Lewis, 2002). 16.1% of Bradford's population is Muslim, while 42% of British Muslims are under 25 years. (National Statistics, 2003)

At the same time there is little to suggest that, until very recently, issues of religion and belief have been given priority in the education and training of social workers in Britain and much to suggest that discussion of religion, in particular has probably declined. Relevant literature available in British journals tends to deal with very specific issues, with particular groups, with issues in other countries or with history. (Bowpitt, 1998; Garr and Marans, 2001; Kirton, 1999; Lloyd, 1997; Pacheco et al, 2003; Runnymede Trust/Wood, 1996; Smyth and Campbell, 1996)

This is in apparent contrast to the earlier resurgence of interest in the role of religion in both social work education and practice in the USA (Amato-von Hemert, 1994; Canda, 1989; Loewenburg, 1988; Netting et al, 1990; Sermabeikian, 1994; Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert, 1999) and to more confident explorations of the role of spirituality by some therapists and other practitioners in health settings in Britain. (Bragan, 1996; Brandon, 1999; Cobb and Robshaw, 1998, Speck, 1998.) However, whilst studies suggest that US social workers are more sympathetic to religious or spiritually

sensitive interventions than their British counterparts (Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert, 1999; Furness and Gilligan, forthcoming a)), there are also indications that a majority of social work students in the USA report that they received very little input related to religion and spirituality during their qualifying training. (Derezotes, 1995; Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert, 1999)

Crompton (1996), meanwhile, reports the view that training in Britain encourages social workers to hold back on their beliefs and quotes social workers in an adoption agency, stating that, in practice, 'We find that it often depends on the views and beliefs of an individual social worker, whether religion is given any importance or not.'

She concluded, in the context of little published material specifically aimed at social workers either on spirituality or on different religions, that, 'To talk about religion and spirituality is for many people as embarrassing as talking about sex, death and money'. Nevertheless, for individuals seeking services from social workers, such issues are, sometimes, amongst those, which they will need to talk about, and about which they will need to know that the listener can respond with sensitivity and competence.

The questionnaire

In view of the potential importance of these issues and the fact that semi-structured interviews tended to reinforce the impression that they are neglected, it seemed appropriate to collect relevant data from qualified social workers. A four-page questionnaire was devised, which addressed issues around:

- the religion/faith/beliefs of respondents
- the impact of religion/faith/beliefs on them as practitioners
- its role in their professional training
- its role in their practice teaching, and
- their use of and views about religious or spiritually sensitive interventions.

Furness, meanwhile, had already begun a survey of the experiences

of current DipSW students. (Furness, 2003)

The sample

Approximately 200 qualified social workers were invited to complete the questionnaire, during the first 6 months of 2003. They included practice teachers attending a practice teaching award programme, children and families workers attending a post qualifying award in child care and practice teachers attending the 2nd International Conference on Practice Teaching: Developing the New World of Practice Learning, held in London, 8 and 9 April 2003.

A total of 46 questionnaires were completed and returned. Respondents included 43 British social workers, employed in, at least, 6 local authorities and 5 voluntary sector agencies. Questionnaires were also completed and returned by 3 practice teaching colleagues from Denmark, Sweden and the USA.

33 (72%) are practice teachers, including 23 (70%) who hold a Practice Teaching Award. They had qualified as social workers between 1967 and 2000.

Individual respondents were self-selecting from amongst several opportunity samples of convenience and, as such, must be viewed as a non-probability sample. (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996) Meanwhile, it seems reasonable to assume that the overall sample is, in fact, likely to be biased towards social workers who are interested in questions of religion and belief and may well include a disproportionately high number of practice teachers who consider it necessary to address issues relating to the impact of religion and belief on social work practice.

See Tables 1–10, Appendix A, for summaries of responses to the questionnaire.

Religious or spiritually sensitive interventions

The final two pages of the questionnaire invited respondents

to answer questions about their use of and their views on the appropriateness of religious or spiritually sensitive interventions in social work practice. This used questions developed in the study by Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert (1999). The responses, which will be presented in more detail elsewhere (Furness and Gilligan, forthcoming a), demonstrated generally lower levels of approval for such interventions than is evident in the original study of social work students in two US schools of social work (Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert, 1999)

For example, only 54% of respondents to this questionnaire considered it 'appropriate' on occasions to 'use religious or spiritual language or concepts', compared to 74% of the American sample.

Identifiable trends?

Other results provided by the questionnaire (See Tables 1–10) suggest a number of possible trends and tend to reinforce the earlier impression that social work has not, and is not, giving issues of religion and belief priority in the education and training of practitioners.

- There was a large group of individuals for whom religion/belief was a strong factor in motivating them to become social workers and a large group for whom it was not; highlighting the strong probability (approx. 50%) that students rating religion/belief as a strong motivating factor will be practice taught by social workers who do not. (See Table 4)
- Although there was a similar tendency towards the extremes, in response to the question about the significance of religion/ belief in influencing social work practice, there was, also, an unexpected tendency for respondents to see religion/beliefs as more significant in influencing their current practice than they saw it in motivating them to become social workers in the first place. (See Table 5)
- The importance of religion/belief in motivating individuals to become social workers did not appear to impact positively on the frequency with which associated issues were explored with

them as students. Of 12 respondents who had rated faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs at '4' or '5' in motivating them to become social workers, only 3 (25%) answered 'Often' or 'Sometimes' to the question about the frequency with which such issues were explored with them during their training, while 9 (75%) answered 'Rarely' or 'Never'. (See Tables 4 and 7)

•   However, the year in which respondents had qualified did appear to be of some significance in determining the frequency with which these issues had been explored. While, those who answered 'Never' or 'Rarely', included both who had qualified in the 1960s, it included only 14 of 20 (70%) who had qualified in the 1970s and 1980s, but 16 of 17 (94%) who qualified after 1990. The likelihood of the issues having been explored apparently decreased progressively, the more recently workers had qualified.

(Jasvinder's experience is, arguably, illustrative of what may have happened to many individuals during their education and training as social workers.

I asked her about her experience as a social work student:

Was the question ever addressed?
No, no ... I remember when I was doing my access course, I had 2 weeks placement with Social Services and ... on the very first day, at lunchtime, I was asked…to accompany him to the pub for lunch and I refused ... and he apologized for asking. He also then wanted to know more about my religion, which I shared with him …

Religion was an object of curiosity when it challenged the expectations of the supervisor, rather than an issue to be explored as a matter of routine.

•   The results of the questionnaire suggested that the 33 practice teachers were more likely to address the issues with their current students than had been their own practice teachers with them. (See Table 7 and Table 8) However, 15 (45%) had, so far, done so 'Rarely' or 'Never'. These included very similar numbers, who

had rated faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs as either a weak or a strong influence on how they practice as social workers; suggesting that the reluctance to explore the issues is not necessarily a function of their individual view as to their importance.

- Practice teachers' own experiences as students, also, did not appear to have influenced their recent practice teaching. The 15 who answered 'Never' or 'Rarely' in response to the question about the frequency with which they had explored these issues with students during supervision included 11 of 26 (42.3%) who answered 'Never' or 'Rarely' in relation to their own experiences as students, while the 18 who answered 'Often' or 'Sometimes' included 12 (50%) of this same 26.

- The 24 practice teachers who said that they were more likely to discuss such issues with some students than with others often gave very similar explanations as to why this was the case. 16 (67%) suggested that they were more likely to explore such issues when students openly declared a faith or the importance of religion or belief to them, or when students took the initiative. However, 3 (13%) suggested that they were more likely to explore such issues when they assessed students' religious beliefs to be potentially antipathetic to social work values. For example, 'If it impacts upon their practice either as a prejudicial block or tends to judgemental practice views' or 'Where bigotry and intolerance are a factor of their religious beliefs.'

Another raised the need for greater caution and sensitivity when discussing 'religion' in Northern Ireland.

Surprisingly, only one highlighted the issue of students working with people from faiths different to their own and only one the possibility of needing to explore such issues in the context of the student 'encountering discrimination/prejudice because of their faith'.

(The approach currently adopted by 'Richard' was, perhaps, typical of the caution of many practice teachers. He had discussed many complex issues about his own changing relationship with religion, the significance of his Christian upbringing and his use of religious imagery in understanding his own and others' feelings. It was clear that religion had played a crucial role in developing his

worldview. I asked him about his practice teaching:

Do you talk about religion?
No, I don't think so.
Spirituality?
Not usually. Not using that word, but I suppose if we were looking at a counselling situation, it might feel to me like this was spirituality, but I wouldn't necessarily find a lot of benefit in importing that into the situation.
Is the approach secular?
I might not be appreciating it myself as just secular. So it might feel spiritual to me, but I would be pretty cautious about introducing that word, unless there had been some previous excursion into 'Is it useful having a spiritual perspective in social work' or something like that. Then I might.)

Such trends should, arguably, cause concern when considered alongside both the strong arguments in favour of the view that all social workers, and children and families workers in particular, need to develop a working knowledge and understanding of the religions and beliefs of service users and an insight into the impact that their own beliefs (or lack of them) has on practice, and the multiplicity of demands already placed on practice teachers. (See Furness and Gilligan, forthcoming b)

Social work with children

Crompton (1996, 1998), like others, notes the apparent importance of the Children Act 1989 in highlighting the need for social workers to give explicit attention to religion.

Seden (1995), meanwhile, recognises the fact that the Act follows the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1995) in giving explicit directions to local authorities to give 'due consideration … to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background' (Section 22 5(c)) when placing them and in requiring that they 'shall not cause the child to be brought up in any religious persuasion other than that in which he would have been brought up if the order had not been made.' (Section 31) (DOH, 1989a) However, she goes on to emphasise that

in assessing the importance of religious persuasion it is important to look beyond the mere preservation of the parents' right to specify creed (i.e. a set of beliefs or religious system) and to look at what being brought up in a particular religious persuasion actually means.

DOH Guidance to the Act reminds us that 'The importance of religion as an element of culture should never be overlooked: to some children and families it may be the dominant factor so that the religion of a foster parent, for example, may in some cases be more important than their ethnic origin.' (DOH, 1989b)

Similarly, the Practice Guidance for Assessing Children in Need and their Families (DOH, 2000) emphasises, that 'Religion or spirituality is an issue for all families whether white or black.' and that 'For families where religion plays an important role in their lives, the significance of their religion will also be a vital part of their cultural traditions and beliefs.' (2.69) However, it also notes that 'there is some evidence to suggest that information about a child's or family's religion is not always recorded in case files'. (2.68)

Such an observation is reinforced by recent experience of marking 19 assignments in which qualified social workers were asked to discuss a 'holistic assessment of a child or young person'. In otherwise satisfactory essays, only 8 (42.1%) candidates for the Post Qualifying Award in Child Care gave information about the culture or ethnicity of those involved and only 2 (10.5%) made specific reference to religion.

Seden (1995) notes that Assessment and Action Records (DOH, 1995) ask 10–14 year olds:

- Do you belong to a particular religion?
- If so, do you have enough opportunities to attend religious services?
- Do you have enough opportunities to follow the customs of your religion (e.g. festivals, prayers, clothing, diet)?
- Who will help you take further action if needed?

and asks, with good reason, whether social workers actually have the skills and confidence to assess whether individual children have 'enough' opportunities to follow their religion. (Seden, 1995)

At the same time, it may be apposite to ask, how much priority social workers will give to children's religious needs, in the context of competing priorities and a lack of emphasis on such issues in social work training and education? In the context of both limited resources and awareness, will budgets, in fact, determine whether a Muslim child has opportunity to attend Mosque and Madrasa or a Catholic child attend Mass?

The need to understand

Ahmad (1996) reminds us that 'Cultural norms provide guidelines for understanding and action, guidelines which are flexible and changing, open to different interpretations across people and across time, structured by gender, class, caste, and other contexts, and which are modulated by previous experiences, relationships, resources and priorities.' (p.190)

This is, clearly, as true for practice teachers and for social work students, as for others. It is, also, clear that learning cannot be separated from the influence of context and culture, including religion and belief. (Boud et al, 1993).

Practice teachers, therefore, need to address questions around the impact of religion and belief, if they are to fulfil their responsibility to assist students to develop competence, in terms of protecting the rights and promoting the interests of service users and carers, whilst treating each person as an individual, and respecting diversity and different cultures and values.' (GSCC, 2002).

Crompton (1998) concluded that

Practitioners involved in direct work with and planning for children need to know about and understand relevant religious traditions, beliefs and experiences. This is essential not only to ensure that children receive appropriate care (including nurture of the spirit), but also in assisting development of a sense of identity and in understanding and helping with problems and anxieties. (p.77)

Her books (Crompton 1996, 1998) provide very useful

introductions to the religious beliefs and observances of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Humanists, Jews, Muslims, Rastafarians and Sikhs, but, experience suggests that they are rarely to be found on the reading lists of social work programmes.

Meanwhile, it appears very clear from Chapter 3 of the Laming report of the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie, that religious beliefs and involvement with a number of churches played some role in this child's tragic fate and in the life and perceptions of her aunt. However, the words 'religion', 'religious', 'church', 'faith', and 'belief' do not appear in either the report's chapter on 'Working with Diversity' or in the 'Recommendations'. (Laming, 2003) It is, as if the report is echoing the evidence of Nana Amamoo, Director of the African Families Foundation. After highlighting the need for central guidance for social workers about what to do about 'a child whose parents attend a charismatic church where they have been in casting out demons and some of the practices may be prejudicial to that child's welfare?', she told the inquiry

> You see, there have been — there are some particular churches in the community where cases of abuse have occurred but it has been overlooked because it is religion and we do not want to go into that … (p.146, Archived Transcript for 22 March 2002, http://www.victoria-climbie-inquiry.org.uk/finreport/finreport.htm)

Some significant dilemmas

Many writers have highlighted the fact that religion is used in a variety of contrasting and contradictory ways; to liberate and to oppress, to comfort and to hurt. Allen and Macey (1988) and Macey, (1999a, 1999b) have, in particular, explored the use which some Muslim men attempt to make of 'religion' and of the Qu'ran to justify and excuse violence towards women, while, at the same time, recognising that young Muslim women are, at the same time, well able to use their religion and its holy book to challenge patriarchal norms.

Crompton (1998) cites others to reinforce the fact that, in the

context of child sexual abuse some aspects of Christian teaching can be unhelpful to victims; for example, in its emphasis on endurance and forgiveness (Kennedy, 1995) or in its worship of a male deity and the notion of perfect fatherhood (Armstrong, 1991), but at the same time, she notes her own and Kennedy's view that churches and other religious groups often offer abused and unhappy children sanctuary and new hope and opportunities to emerge from the trap of self-blame.

She found that although 'Children are legally entitled to spiritual and religious nurture, just as they are entitled to physical and cognitive care', attitudes towards religion amongst social workers 'will vary from hostility to devotion, indifference to enthusiasm, rigidity to universalism.' As a result, the question of whether children have opportunities to use the positive opportunities offered by religion or to resolve the negative impact of the misuse of religion by abusers may be dependent on the attitudes of their social workers, rather than the children's own needs or inclinations.

Religion and belief may play a very significant role in determining the particular way in which people interpret events, resolve dilemmas, make decisions and view themselves, their own actions and the actions of others. Social workers will not be competent to engage with them or to facilitate these processes if they simply ignore this important aspect of many service users' lives. As Crompton (1996) reminds us, 'Practitioners may dislike the beliefs and observances of children for whom they are responsible, yet every child has the right to religious respect and encouragement.'

Inevitably, practice teachers and agencies are, also, very likely to find themselves responsible for students and employees whose views bring them into direct conflict with their duties and responsibilities as social workers. For example, regarding the approval of same-sex couples as adopters; an issue, which has already seen the redeployment of 2 social workers in Sefton within a few months of new legislation being passed and which raises fundamental questions about the boundaries between accommodating individual consciences and tolerating unacceptable attitudes. (See http://www.lsbr28029.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/Adoption-SocialWorkers.htm) Meanwhile, it is certain that such dilemmas cannot be resolved by being ignored.

Conclusion

We practice social work in a richly diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, in which religious and other beliefs are of crucial importance to many and play a role in shaping the worldview of most. In such a context, there are many reasons why all social workers, and children and families workers, in particular, need to develop a working knowledge and understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of service users. Without such knowledge and understanding, we cannot adequately perform our statutory duties or meet our professional responsibilities. And we cannot begin to claim that our work is culturally competent.

It follows that there is a clear need for practice teachers and others involved in the professional training of social workers to ensure that students learn to recognise the significance of religion and beliefs to many service users and know where and how to find knowledge about these issues.

Practice teachers and others need to recognise the likely, but not always obvious, significance of religion and belief to many social work students. We need to be ready to explore these issues with them, as potential sources of personal values, of serious dilemmas, of motivation and support and of anxiety in relation to social work practice.

There is, however, much to suggest that social work educators, including practice teachers, have been reluctant or unable to adequately address issues around religion and beliefs, despite the existence of relevant legislation, guidance and literature, and that this reluctance and inability still characterises the experience of most social work students.

At the same time, there is an apparent willingness on the part of many practice teachers to recognise the need to grapple with these issues and to explore ways to do so. For many involved in the work reported here, the possibility of doing so, appeared not to have occurred to them, before the questions were asked. Many subsequently offered comments suggesting that, they will be more likely to address issues around religion and beliefs with students, in the future. What they, perhaps, need now are more tools to help them do so.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Ethnicity of respondents (*N*=46)

	n	%
'White'	38	83
Other	8[1]	17
No answer	3	7

1. Of which, 'Black' 1, 'Mixed parentage' 1, 'Asian' 1, 'Sikh' 1, 'British' 1

Table 2
Were you brought up in any particular religious faith or other identifiable set of beliefs?' (*N*=46)

	n	%
Yes,	34[1]	74
No or No Answer	12	26

1. Of which Christian 30 (65%), Sikh 1, Muslim 1, Not specified 2

Table 3
'Do you currently view yourself as having a particular religious faith or other identifiable set of beliefs?' (*N*=46)

	n	%
Yes, of which:	27	59
Christian[1]	35	16
Spiritual Beliefs[2]	5	11
'Socialist'	2	4
'Muslim'	1	2
'Sikh'	1	2
'Pseudo Christian'	1	2
No	16	34
No answer	3	7

1. Any denomination.
2. includes: 'Earth-based spirituality', 'No name belief in an entity', 'Alternative beliefs in human energy', 'Theism' and 'Universal Creator'.

Table 4

'How significant was your faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs in motivating you to become a social worker?' (*N*=46)

	5	4	3	2	1	0	No answer
n	5	7	9	1	7	16	1
%	11	15	20	2	15	35	2

Table 5

'How significant is your faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs as an influence on how you practice as a social worker?'(*N*=46)

	5	4	3	2	1	0	No answer
n	5	11	10	3	7	8	2
%	11	24	22	7	15	17	4

Table 6

'How significant is your faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs in sustaining you through the difficulties and distress you experience as a social worker?' (*N*=46)

	5	4	3	2	1	0	No answer
n	5	11	4	4	6	15	1
%	11	24	9	9	13	33	2

Table 7

'When you were a social work student, how frequently was your faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs and its impact on your social work practice explored, during your training? (*N*=46)

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	N/A
n	5	4	16	19	2
%	11	9	35	41	4

Table 8
'As a practice teacher, how frequently have you explored a student's faith or upbringing in a particular religion or other identifiable set of beliefs and its impact on their social work practice, during their supervision?' (*N*=33)

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
n	6	12	8	7
%	18	24	24	21

Table 9
'Are you more likely to explore such issues with some students than with others?'(*N*=33)

	Yes	No	No answer
n	24	8	1
%	72	24	3

Table 10
'Do you think that greater attention should be given to such issues in the new social work degree?'(*N*=46)

	Yes	No	No answer
n	31	10	5
%	67	22	11