Editorial

Spirituality represents a central issue in the lives of many people from developed through to developing countries in the world and across all strata of societies. From days of suspicion of spiritual issues when solely associated with organised religion interest has grown amongst people seeking meaning in their lives from a variety of sources. Given this common search for a spiritual life it is somewhat surprising that health and social work have only recently begun to pay attention to the importance of this aspect of people's lives. Spirituality assumes a greater magnitude of importance for many when dealing with our challenging, complex and changing contemporary world. Social, community, family and individual concerns across the world often reflect issues of a spiritual nature, ones that get at the very root of what it is to be human. For some this striving for meaning remains secular, focused on humanist-existential issues, and for others it involves consideration of particular religious teachings and values.

The Seventh International Conference for Practice Learning and Field Education in Health and Social Work held in York, England in July 2008, focused on issues of spirituality, attracting a wealth of high calibre scholarship, predominantly from the developed world - notably the UK and Australia - but nonetheless important in articulating shared issues of spirituality that transcend national boundaries, economic status and political complexities in contemporary life. This issue of the journal captures many of the papers presented at this conference and adds to the academic and practice debates concerning the place of spirituality in social work and health care and professions that interface most directly and intimately with people.

In the first of the papers in this edition, Caroline Humphrey examines the hidden, almost clandestine approach some people take in respect of their own spiritual and faith beliefs. The links with the concept of 'coming out of' or living within a 'closet', a concept we know well in respect of gay and lesbian issues, is developed. The paper reports

research with student social workers and their educators in which faith and belief were explicitly considered. Humphrey recognises the growing trend towards interest in spirituality and religion. Motivated in part by her own explorations of faith and the wider growing interest in spirituality, she explored the observation that faith-based students often construct a closet in which to conceal their faith from others in what is perceived as a predominantly secular and often hostile world. The workings of the closet and the workings of faith are explored in relation to professional education, ethics and practice as well as research into these territories.

In their paper, Greta Galloway and colleagues seek to identify common mistakes that social work students' make whilst undertaking field education or practice learning when approaching faith and spirituality and the importance ascribed to place within that context. The paper considers the Christian conception of sacredness and space, which Galloway and her colleagues believe, often underpins these student errors, and Aboriginal Australian conceptions of place and spirituality. Mutually exclusive conceptions of these spaces are held by many non-Aboriginal welfare practitioners in Australia echoing some of the ideas of space believed to be held by students from white Christian background. The paper offers some suggestions for ways in which qualified social workers, and social work students, could engage with spirituality, including perspectives of 'geo-socio-political materiality' in their work. This has significant implications for social work with indigenous, migrant, refugee or colonial settler populations. The paper takes issue with much contemporary literature on cultural competence in relation to issues of land and space, and the identity people gain from their connections and associations with land, and spirituality. Galloway and her colleagues conclude by identifying a range of key questions for social work students and their educators 'seeking to respond appropriately when interfacing sacred spaces of the 'other".

In Bernard Moss's paper the difficulties of tackling issues of spirituality and belief in student supervision and the uncertainty felt by many practice teachers is recognised and explored. He uses the key social work themes of loss and celebrating diversity to propose ways in which practice teachers and field educators can engage with these issues with their students. Moss draws on a well-known model for considering oppressions and discrimination, Thompson's PCS analysis, which explores the Personal, Cultural and Structural/Societal dimensions to

discrimination and oppression. Moss's innovative development and enrichment of this model seeks to develop a strengths perspective within the analysis that also includes spirituality and faith issues (PCSS).

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree presents a conceptual paper considers aspects of a highly neglected and important contemporary topic: Islamic perspectives in social work education and practice. Her paper uses the concept of a journey to illuminate Islamic-informed values together with those of social work practice and the types of professional intervention appropriate to working with Muslim families. Ashencaen Crabtree examines the range and magnitude of potential problems impacting upon Muslim communities in Britain, specifically relating to deprivation, social alienation and domestic violence (including so-called 'honour' crimes). Alongside these issues, she reviews health issues in terms of mental health and disability.

Russell Whiting's paper offers an account of his research concerning a single session on an MA in Social Work qualifying programme, which explored the place of religion in social work. Two focus groups were conducted with participants and a questionnaire was completed by the whole student group immediately after the debate. The paper analyses excerpts from the debate that took place between students, the focus groups and material from the questionnaire. The paper also looks at using debates as a pedagogical tool building on Gregory and Holloway's (2005) work on the use of debates in social work education. The paper also points out the lack of work published about how issues pertaining to religion and spirituality are addressed in social work education and discusses possible ways forward.

Peter Wright's and Paul Webster's paper is slightly different. This paper reports a discussion initiated at the conference and is presented in discursive rather than academic paper format. Both authors suggest that virtue ethics challenges standard ethical paradigms about what constitutes social work as a moral endeavour, and rather locates the source of morality within the individual person's character. Virtue ethics, as the authors' suggest, proposes that a virtuous, social worker (one who is caring, compassionate, just and generous) is one whose authenticity derives from what it is to be a true human being exercising moral virtues in and of themselves. Wright argues that what it is to be a true human being is for many connected essentially with spirituality, faith and religion. The idea of virtue defining a 'good or just' human is found in most religions and faiths. However, contemporary virtue ethics

understands this authenticity from a primarily secular philosophical perspective. Wright and Webster agree that both perspectives speak to what it is to be a good social worker but ask whether the two perspectives are reconcilable. The paper adds to the debate in practice whether the secular challenge of virtue ethics challenges the place of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education?

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