

Social work and spirituality

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State of art

Spirituality is becoming a buzz word in 21st century, especially non dogmatic, participatory spirituality, separated and at times in juxtaposition with religion. At a time when neoliberal managerialist approaches to social work are eroding the relationship-based nature of practice and notions of collective responsibility for welfare, and the 'old fashioned' concepts like compassion, reciprocity and mutuality are no longer given prominence, there has never been a more important time to reflect on what spirituality can offer both practitioners and service users.

Spirituality relates not only to human experience and relationship with the numinous but also to meaning and purpose in life, creativity, the sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), authenticity, the sense of coherence and a sense of collective responsibility for all beings. Spirituality (however one chooses to define it) has the potential to provide purpose to social work and an opportunity for connectivity to others. In relation to connectivity, we assert that inquiry learning and collaboration between academics and postgraduate students, that we have been promoting over years within the Social Work and Spirituality postgraduate course/symposium, enabled participants to find ways of bringing forth the world through our non-dogmatic and appreciative social work practices. Unfortunately, the current state of art in social work is different to our ideal of sitting around the round table, elaborating ideas, co-supervising one another's practices and making decisions that will not only benefit clients but their families and communities. Western social work in its essence is patronising and individualistic. Although it is based on ideals of reciprocity and appreciation, in everyday practice it often reverses to 'firefighting' and patching up problems created by unjust society. Social workers in the western world are becoming tools of social control, while being educated to be agents of social change. This schism has a potential of creating compliance or resistance and as a result a crisis in practitioners' perception of the meaning and purpose of their work.

It is our belief that an exploration of non-dogmatic anti-authoritarian spirituality, (or to put it positively appreciative and respectful spirituality) and its relationship with social work can enable social workers to liberate themselves from professional colonisation that neoliberal, managerialistic, individualistic and socially controlling way of practising has imposed on them. So instead of explaining and 'stating' the state of art, a list of inquiry questions will follow, in the hope that these questions will create a 'dialogue in praxis' so essential for effective social work practice. These questions are meant to point to the state of art in the area of spirituality in social work.

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for

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diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels” (IFSW, 2014).

Principles of social justice, human rights and respect for diversity have their strongest articulation and potential for change when they are expressed in terms of meaning and purpose in life. However, spirituality needs to be reconciled with the challenges of organised religions because of the potential for misuse of power, and this is why we argue for an eclectic approach to spirituality which encompasses religious and non-religious expressions of term. This is the essence of our definition of spirituality in social work.

We assert that the time has come where solely western interpretation of social work is not adequate anymore in a globalised world. We believe that indigenous and culturally specific ways of practice can offer new directions in social work where one size does not fit all. Social work can be practised and has been practised across the world in many ways and negating or minimising the effectiveness or quality of indigenous practices is not only discriminatory but damaging for the profession as a whole. Collaborative, co-creative and appreciative approaches to explore various ways of social work practice can enable practitioners to expand their knowledge and ensure that their practices are not colonising.

In addition, social work practice is if anything, an ethical endeavour and a key overarching theme of the programme is the “Ethics of inclusion”. The Spirituality course/symposium seeks to draw out our ethical practice or ethical approaches to practice by asking some fundamental questions of ourselves that will encourage more dialogue and bravery in exploring issues related to beliefs that guide our social work practice and our clients’ lived experience.

The following questions will provide a starting point for our dialogue in praxis:

What role do your beliefs play in your social work or social work teaching practice?

How do purposeful social work actions in your practice energise your practice?

Are there any obstacles (internal or external) that you are aware of that social workers need to overcome in order to become spirited social work practitioners?

Is the spirit of social work the liminal ‘in-between’ space that we co-create with our clients or somewhere else?

How is the spirit of social work manifested in the new International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) global definition of social work (as referred to above):

“Social workers comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable” – does this saying reflect the spirit of social work, social workers’ ability to balance their role as social change agents and agents of social control? And what does it say about the mission of social work?

Are neoliberalism and globalisation transforming the purpose and mission of social work?

What are the counterbalancing philosophies borne out of reaction to neoliberalism and globalisation? Can these be found in secular humanism, unifying religions, scientific discoveries in quantum physics, or epigenetics, or in indigenous knowledge?

Contradictions and challenges

There are a number of beliefs, contradictions and challenges that may prevent social workers from addressing spirituality in social work:

1. Do not talk about religion and politics in your professional life

Yet, these conversations are most interesting as they relate to beliefs, context and what is important in life.

2. Spirituality is something deep and personal and in short encounters with our clients, we should not address it

In order to be effective, social work needs to be deep and personal. Even during a short encounter talking about beliefs, purpose and meaning set the stage for relevant and transformative work to occur.

3. If you talk about spirituality you will inadvertently impose your beliefs onto your clients

Potentially, providing a social worker does not know how to manage power and is prone to converting clients to their own views and beliefs. If this happens, it is an evidence of incompetent practice, not a warning against discussing spirituality.

4. Social work is a science and there is no need to talk about airy-fairy things

Beliefs are guiding human behaviour, purpose and meaning are fuelling it. Clearly expressed beliefs are very practical. If clients do not see the purpose, meaning and improvement in their quality of life as a result of our interactions and interventions, it is not likely that they will be keen to engage with us.

5. I pray for my clients, so they will be OK

With or without their permission? Have they asked for it? Isn't social work more about action? Would you mind someone making a little voodoo doll of you and play with it?

6. There is no space for prayer in professional social work

"Spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity teach us to revere the power of thoughts and intentions. On the more subtle levels of consciousness, thoughts and intentions are seen to affect others and ourselves in ways that exceed notions of perception and "self-fulfilling prophesy." How might we include a careful and reverent attitude to the intentions we bring to our work with clients? How might prayers become a powerful means of clearing intentions and introducing another kind of healing force to work?" (McKernan, 2007, p. 105)

7. It is not important what my clients believe, it is more important what they do

Apparently, Gandhi said: "Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values and your values become your destiny" and Margaret Thatcher said: "Watch your thoughts for they become words.

Watch your words for they become actions.

Watch your actions for they become habits.

Watch your habits for they become your character.

And watch your character for it becomes your destiny.

What we think, we become.

My father always said that... and I think I am fine."

The real source of this quote is unknown, but it is often contributed to Gandhi, but without clear reference where and in what context was it said. It is interesting that a powerful quote like this can be used to justify behaviour regardless of the political spectrum it is coming from.

8. Indigenous beliefs about health and spirituality are primitive and not helpful for contemporary social work

With the planet being at the state of crisis due to unsustainable management of our affairs, indigenous knowledge is more and more called forth to rescue humanity from a failing paradigm. Forgotten wisdom has been excavated and western world is turning for help from oppressed indigenous communities. Appreciation of indigenous wisdom and anti-discriminatory practice is at a core of effective social work, so collaboration and exploration of past may lead to creation of better future.

9. Effectiveness of our interactions with clients should be measurable

In most cases to justify funding for social work agencies and prove that social work practice works, however, most memorable experiences are hard to measure as humans are more like flickering lights than slabs of meat. Moreover, this obsession with measurable outcomes is indicative of the neoliberalism and its claim to objective science, and is very one-dimensional. How do you quantify compassion, care, kindness, respect which may help a person who is oppressed, feel valued? It is these relationship aspects of social work we need to restore, enrich and embrace, if we are not to reduce practice to a compliance activity with neoliberal risk assessment instruments. It is not just the dogma of religious fundamentalism that challenges social work's social justice aspirations but the dogma of neoliberal evidence based practice and risk instrumentalism. Spirituality, however one defines it, is one of the viable options to enable us to develop strategies and frameworks to return to relationship based, rapport building social work practice which thinks globally and acts locally.

Programme for the future

The search for meaning and purpose expands minds of the rich and offers hope to the poor. Spiritual congruence enables compassion, reciprocity and mutuality as well as being centred and responsible for actions. The programme for the future is best depicted in this poem, written by a social work scholar Michael Sheridan and it will be materialised in the course programme where participants will explore how does social work practice looks like within their particular settings when they nurture the soul of social work.

If we nurtured the soul of social work

Michael Sheridan

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our students would feel stimulated and supported, instead of stressed out, pushed through, used, and abused.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our faculty members would act like colleagues and friends, instead of like competitors and adversaries.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our administrators would spend their time being creative leaders, instead of finding themselves being harried arbitrators of warring factions.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our educational programs would be more committed to creative and transformative learning, instead of being in the top 20 list of US News and World Report

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our scholarship would focus on pressing human needs, instead of counts of faculty productivity and debates about competing paradigms.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our agencies and organizations would be concerned with improving the human condition and eradicating oppression, instead of maintaining the status quo and defending their ‘turf’.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our practitioners would rejoice in the life paths they’ve taken, instead of becoming burnt-out, cynical and marking time until retirement.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our clients would experience themselves as respected partners in the journey, instead of faceless, nameless “others” on some census of agency effort.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our society would benefit from our passion and commitment to social justice, instead of suffering from our actions as hand-servants of harmful, outdated policies or as misguided meddlers in human affairs.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

Our earth would know us as dedicated, stewards of her wonders, instead of just another group of indifferent consumers of her bounty and spoilers of her beauty.

If we nurtured the soul of social work,

The spiritual would be recognised as an essential part of what we’re about and would be reflected in all that we do- and the mystery would smile and be glad (Sheridan, 1997, p. 3).

We may conclude that the future is in nurturing the soul of social work, personally, professionally and politically by caring about our human instrument, promoting life giving and transformative practices, encouraging innovation, collaborating with our clients and colleagues and standing up for the underdog sometimes in our offices, at our computers or on the barricades demonstrating for just and equitable world.

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