

Social Work, Religion and Spirituality:
How Social Work Practitioners Integrate Their Practice in Indonesia, the
Philippines and Thailand
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“Social Work, Religion and Spirituality: Professional vs. Personal Practice”
Keynote Address

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Abstract : *The issue of religion and spirituality in the context of social work practice has received increasing attention recently. Social work practitioners vary in the extent to which they are comfortable addressing religion and spirituality. Those who are religious can feel uncomfortable discussing certain issues with their clients, especially if they conflict with their own religious and spiritual values. When religion and spirituality is a crucial part of a client's belief system and social well-being, evaluating our social work practice is essential when providing professional services. Through reflecting on their practice, social work practitioners can enhance their own competency in accordance with the ethical principles of the profession. This paper discusses some of the challenges social work practitioners face when discussing issues related to religion and spirituality with their clients and explores different ways of responding to such issues.*

Introduction

Social work is a profession that involves helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to enhance their social functioning and well-being. Social work practitioners help people develop skills and the ability to empower themselves so that they can resolve their own problems. It has been argued that many contemporary social work values stem from religious institutions. Most religions hold that neighbours are to be respected and valued, and aim to help people in need and bring about social justice.

Responding to the needs of others is universally understood as a way to serve one's God or gods (Miller, 2001; Ragab, 2016; Richards, 2005; Wineman, 1995).

Social work practitioners are expected to follow the general principles of the International Association Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) when serving their clients. Social workers face many challenges and dilemmas when engaging with clients, which can be related to differing values and belief systems, cultural differences, political ideologies, lack of resources, laws and social policies, and even the educational backgrounds of social workers. By drawing on and upholding social work principles, social workers can make informed decisions on how to assist their clients. A core ethical principle is that social workers should not impose their own values and should promote the concept of self-determination for their clients. They are expected to assess their clients' weaknesses and strengths before offering what they consider to be the most operational intervention for them (IASSW & IFSW, 2004).

Problem statement

The issue of religion and spirituality in the context of social work practice has been widely discussed but the extent to which social work practitioners are comfortable addressing this subject with their clients has been less researched (Miller, 2001; Ragab, 2016; Richards, 2005; Wineman, 1995). Social work practitioners who profess a faith may feel uncomfortable discussing certain issues with their clients, particularly if they are in conflict with their religious or spiritual values. On the other hand, many social workers can be totally oblivious of their clients' religious or spiritual values, which can lead to an insensitive and inappropriate intervention being proposed. To complicate things further, clients who are not religious or who are non-believers can still be spiritual; one does not have to be affiliated or belong to an organized religion to cultivate one's spiritual well-being.

Where religion does play an important role in clients' lives, faith is a crucial part of their belief system and cultural traditions. Consequently, reflecting on and evaluating our social work practice is especially important when providing social care and delivering professional services to religious clients. Doing so enables social workers to be ethically accountable to both the profession and the people we serve (Christopherson, 2019; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan, 2010; Miller, 2001; Ragab, 2016; Richards, 2005).

I would like to share some of my thoughts on this subject today, and I encourage you to reflect on the following questions as my paper proceeds:

- a) What would be the potential challenges for social workers when discussing issues related to religion and spirituality?
- b) When social workers should be concerned with the issues of religion and spirituality in providing social work interventions to their clients?

- c) How should social workers raise the issues of religion and spirituality with their clients?

Social work past and present

The definition of social work as agreed by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014 is as follows:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and the liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for 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 & IAASW, 2019)

Social problems that occurred in the 20th century during the era of industrialization and urbanization ignited the development of social work as a profession. The emergence of social, health, economic and political phenomena such as the violation of human and civil rights, stigma and discrimination, HIV and AIDS-related issues, immigration and migration, economic recession and technological advancement, civil wars and ceasefires all saw social work to develop as a profession. Since the inception of social work as a discipline in the early 1900s, many countries now offer social work education at their own higher learning institutions (Baba, 1990, 2016; Hopps & Collins, 1995; Lee, 1929; Popple, 1995).

Historically, the development of social welfare in the contemporary sense began with the notion that the state is responsible for the provision of social assistance. The conversion from personal, religious, charity to contemporary social assistance began in 17th century England. The provision of aid to those deserving of social assistance dates back to the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 (de Schweinitz, 1943). Subsequently, social work emerged in many countries from a variety of social welfare services provided by charity, religious and community organizations in the form of settlement homes, orphanages and mental hospitals. These organizations employed a few untrained social workers but most of the work was performed by volunteers. Many of the volunteers were members of the religious and charity organizations, including women, housewives, and individuals who belonged to political parties. Since the work basically revolved around providing basic needs such as food, clothing, financial aid, and shelter, it was not considered necessary to conduct psychosocial assessments of the recipients (Baba, 1992, 2016; Hopps & Collins, 1995; Lee, 1929; Popple, 1995).

The need to professionalize social work emerged in the late 19th century when the Charity Organization Societies (COS) movement decided that scientific methods should be applied when trying to assist socially disadvantaged individuals and families in the United States. This decision occurred at a time when relief-giving agencies were completely disoriented and lacked coordination. Services were

poorly delivered and there were no guiding principles for volunteers to follow when assisting the needy. At the same time, COS also realized that having to depend on volunteers for the provision of social services was totally chaotic. By the 1890s, a serious effort was made to appoint committed volunteers and train them as social workers. This attracted women who were educated and interested in making social work a career. The development of social work was also influenced by the fields of medicine and engineering. Both fields were able to demonstrate that science could be applied in social work to solve current and future social problems of society (Baba, 1992, 2016; Hopps & Collins, 1995; Lee, 1929; Popple, 1995).

For what was considered charity work to be established as a profession, however, a training program need to be recognized by US higher learning institutions. Dawes (1893) and Richmond (1897) were the forerunners of the development of social work education in the United States. As a result of their papers on the need for social work training, a formal in-service professional social work education was introduced in the late 1890s and early 1900s in Boston, New York, Chicago, Missouri, and Philadelphia. This was also the beginning of social casework being distinguished from volunteer work. In 1905, a course on medical social work began at Massachusetts General Hospital (Trattner, 1989).

The development of contemporary social work in countries around the world occurred at different rates according to the social, political, and economic pressures of each country. In the 21st century many countries insist that social workers must be licensed to practice while other countries still do not recognize social work as a profession. The establishment of the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW), together with IFSW and IASSW, has made the profession more visible on the global scale. These three organizations regularly discuss welfare matters and issues related to social work advancements at their biennial meetings (Baba, 1992, 2016; Hopps & Collins, 1995; Lee, 1929; Otis, 1995; Popple, 1995).

As a profession, social workers are governed by rules of professional conduct. Professional conduct is behaviour that has been stipulated by the profession's ethical principles or behavioural guidelines. These principles are the value base of social work as a profession. They define the overall goals, objectives, and mission of the profession (Abbot, 1988). Professional conduct for social workers was introduced by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). NASW was formed in 1955 and is the practice organization for the profession in the United States. Its professional conduct guidelines are today used globally by all social work associations as the ethical principles of the profession. The bylaws of NASW include a) to promote the quality and effectiveness of social work practice with individual, the group and the community; b) to improve conditions of life in society through the utilization of professional values, knowledge, and skills; and c) to maintain and promote high standards of practice. In 1997, NASW added bylaws on promoting sound social policies on welfare reforms, AIDS, national health care and protection of civil rights, as well as on competent social work practice with diverse client groups,

with emphasis on multicultural competency (Goldstein & Beebe, 1995; IASSW & IFSW, 2004; NASW, 2019).

Religion and spirituality

The world's religions emerged out of institutional and social systems that date back millennia. Religions have sacred histories, narratives, symbols, and holy places that aim to give meaning to life. Religious practices may involve ceremonies, sermons, sacrifices, celebrations, feasts, trances, inductions, funereal services, marital services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, community service, and other aspects of human culture that involve values, emotion, and ethics. Religions invoke the supernatural and transcendental, where God (in monotheistic religions) is a supernatural being considered divine and sacred. Religion is closely related to morality (what is proper and improper behaviour), which concerns the cognitive orientation of individuals and society and includes values, emotions, and ethics. Religion is a very complex phenomenon, so much so that there is no scholarly consensus on its definition (Christopherson, 2019; Cline, 2019; Crisp, 2008; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan, 2010).

As defined by Beckett and Johnson (1995), spirituality refers to the views and behaviours that express a sense of connection or affiliation to something superior to the self. Spirituality signifies a level of awareness that exceeds the ordinary physical domain and can bring a sense of meaning and purpose to individuals, families, groups, and communities. Crucially, spirituality is not a social institution like religion, with some arguing that an individual chooses to be spiritual and is not converted to a particular belief system. A spiritual person develops a true sense of understanding by loving and accepting the world and the people around him or her.

Just where to draw the line between religion and spirituality is very difficult to decide. Regardless of one's belief system, dogma, or philosophy, one can still be spiritual. Some people adopt a private spirituality, while others engage publicly in all the rituals that are associated with organized religion. Neither religion nor spirituality is "better" or "worse" than the other (Christopherson, 2019; Cline, 2019; Crisp, 2008; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan, 2010).

The challenges of social change for social workers

Social issues and problems are becoming more complex as traditional social institutions such as family, religion, politics, economics, and education are challenged by new sets of values and attitudes. Social change, globalization, and urbanization are causing more and more societies to become high-tech and consumer-driven. These forces alter family structures, the division of labour, patterns of migration, gender identity and gender roles. On the other hand, the same forces can also cause people to become more conformist, conventional and traditional. Keeping up with these rapid changes in society while

maintaining the competence and skills expected of a professional presents a great challenge to all social workers (Furness & Gilligan, 2010; NASW, 2019; Perrons, 2004; Reamer, 2014; Spaniol, 2002). As individuals, families, groups, and communities in a developing society become more interconnected through the internet and digital technology, their increased awareness of social workers can lead to increased demand for their services. At the same time, the leaders of the society might want to maintain the status quo and might actively resist social change, globalization and urbanization.

Social workers are required and expected to maintain their professional conduct when providing social work interventions for their clients. But they are also human beings who have certain values and standards that link to their family and religious institutions. Consciously or unconsciously, these values may be used when helping clients to deal with their social problems, especially when certain issues are foreign to social workers or when an issue is unfamiliar or uncomfortable to deal with. Issues such as abortion, pre-marital sex, divorce, pornography, recreational drugs, gun control, LGBTQ, immigration, the death penalty and euthanasia may be difficult topics for some social workers to be confronted with. It is in situations like these when transference and countertransference may occur during an intervention with clients, and this can violate or infringe on the helping process. Social workers who are religious, spiritual or have difficulty separating their personal versus their professional ones may be particularly challenged in such cases.

Ideally, supervision of social workers who are experiencing ethical tensions in their work would be in place, but many social workers, especially in Asia, do not have the luxury of a once-a-week or once-a-month supervision session. In situations where the supervisory facility does exist, it can help social workers to reflect on their own practice when dealing with religion and spirituality. In situations where social workers do not have access to supervision or have untrained or inexperienced supervisors, their professional development can be compromised (Council on Social Work Education, 1992; Furness & Gilligan, 2010; NASW, 2019; Reamer, 2014; Schlesinger & Devore, 1995).

Providing psychosocial support on religion and spirituality

When providing a social work intervention, social workers should always begin with the client. That is to say, every client is different and unique with a different sets of values, belief and support systems. A social worker should not have a preconceived idea of his/her clients, even if he/she shares similar values, beliefs and support systems. A Moslem, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, or spiritual social worker may or may not support abortion. Social workers should never impose their position on a given issue on their clients. A social worker should not advocate against abortion just because their client shares the same belief system as them. On the other hand, a social worker may withdraw completely from discussing pro-reproductive rights totally just because their client has a different belief system. Social workers should avoid treating clients differently with regard to religion as this can lead to double

standards when helping their clients. In this situation, the social worker should provide the opportunity to discuss both the pro-reproductive rights and anti-abortion positions openly to their client so the client can make an informed decision (Canda, 2002; Ferguson, 2005; Christopherson, 2019; Crisp, 2008; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan).

Most professional social work associations around the world have their own mechanisms for monitoring the professional behaviour performance of their members. As mentioned earlier, professional behaviour is defined by the ethical principles that have been agreed upon and stipulated by the IFSW and IAASW. In some instances, however, certain forms of misconduct are difficult to define, especially when they are not reinforced or accepted by respective countries or by the majority of the members of the professional associations. Rights concerning LGBTQ, HIV&AIDS, pre-marital sex or the use of recreational drugs, for instance, may not be supported by some nations. Even among trained social workers, many are still uncomfortable dealing with such issues. And yet we are required by the NASW code of ethics to offer a helping process to all clients without being biased and judgmental. When it comes to judging whether or not a social worker has violated the professional code of ethics, only members of the social work associations are fully qualified to judge. Intellectually, many social workers may recognize misconduct exists but chose to be detached and disengaged, which may be due to their own religious or spiritual affiliations. Over the years, violations involving clients have increased, especially in nations that do not have social work associations and do not recognize the international organizations. Complaints from clients also involve untrained social workers who are unaware of the NASW code of ethics (NASW, 2019; Reamer, 2014).

Social workers and issues of religion and spirituality

Long before the establishment of social work as a profession, religions provided social services to their members, particularly to the poor, oppressed, homeless, and marginalized populations. Since the emergence of modern social work, religious individuals have chosen social work as the expression of their own faithfulness and devotion to their respective religion. However, as the world became more secular in the second half of the 20th century, more social workers felt the need to distance themselves from religion. This has put strain on the relationship between religious institutions and social work. As an institution, a religion has its own characteristics such as language, symbols, codes, norms, values, and culture. Social workers must make an effort to understand these distinctive characteristics for their interventions to be effective. These characteristics provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and connectedness to a client's social well-being. The reality is that some clients often ask religious questions, and not responding to these questions implies that we are insensitive to their needs. Social workers should not avoid religious or spiritual issues that are raised by their clients (Dutt & Phillips, 2000, Furness & Gilligan, 2010; Miller, 2001; Ragab, 2016; Richards, 2005).

The conflict between social work and religion or spirituality may be due to differences between social work ethics and the religious belief system of clients. In the helping process, a social worker must accept the choice or decision that has been made by the client, even if the choice is incompatible and inconsistent with the ethics of social work – unless that choice or decision is going to harm others. The social worker has the duty to explain the risks and social consequences of the client's decision but must respect the client's right to self-determination, whereby the client is allowed to have control over his/her choice and life for the purpose of human growth (Christopherson, 2019; Crisp, 2008; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan, 2010).

Religion or spirituality is an important factor in the lives of individuals, families, groups, and communities all around the world. Clients who are spiritual but not religious, or who do not have any religious affiliation at all and are non-believers or atheists, may still have certain views about the spiritual well-being of their family members. It is important for the social worker to invite these clients to express their views related to spirituality. Clients who are spiritual but not religious may need a lot of support since many of them may not have a support system. Some may have become spiritual due to personal conflicts about how traditional religions explain life. In the helping process, it is important for the social worker to provide as much support as possible because such clients can often feel that they are completely alone. Some may not feel comfortable openly discussing their spiritual views with others for fear they may be ostracised and perhaps experienced stigma and discrimination. Some clients who are spiritual and not religious may benefit from support from other spiritual groups in the community. Having no knowledge as to whether or not clients are spiritual may prevent social workers from connecting their clients with other support systems (Christopherson, 2019; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan, 2010).

Social workers' code of ethics requires them to demonstrate respect for all individuals, families, groups, and communities and to work in equal partnerships. This is not to say that social workers should accept the values or viewpoints of their clients without question, particularly when certain behaviours and actions can be harmful to others. Social workers must be open enough to invite dialogue and reflection. Therefore, effective communication skills are essential to building up relationships between social workers and clients. Social workers need to recognize the importance of incorporating cultural, religious, and spiritual sensitivity when providing social work interventions. They must also have good awareness in terms of their own religious and spiritual beliefs – or lack of them. The way social workers respond to issues related to religion and spirituality can open up opportunities to assess clients' strengths, difficulties and needs to provide more meaningful psychosocial support (Canda, 2002; Ferguson, 2005; Christopherson, 2019; Crisp, 2008; Dutt & Phillips, 2000; Furness & Gilligan, 2010).

Conclusion

Social work is a profession with its own body of knowledge, values, and skills. As professionals, social workers work to enhance the social well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities. As a profession, social workers have always been confronted with issues that may challenge their own values or belief system. Social workers need to be culturally sensitive when dealing both with clients who are religious and clients who are spiritual but not religious when providing a social work intervention. A psychosocial assessment of a client's religion and spirituality needs to form part of a social worker's practice since each client is different and unique in terms of how they view their connectedness with a larger sense of meaning and purpose.

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