

Integrating Religion and Belief in Social Work Practice: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines how social work practitioners in England integrate service users' religion, belief and spiritual identities. The study involved 34 semi-structured interviews with Qualified Social Workers and took a qualitative investigational perspective. By means of thematic analysis, the study suggests that practitioners employ either *avoidant* or *utilitarian* approaches, which may indeed be a coping strategy before the vast religious plurality in practice. The study also highlights when professionals perceive religion, belief and spirituality important. Those times are a) initial assessments, b) conditional intervention, c) referrals and d) response to this subject when safeguarding and child protection issues arise.

Keywords: social work; religion; nonreligion; belief; spirituality; practice

Introduction

This paper explores how religion and belief manifest in practice. Service users often draw on their faith to make sense of their situation, thus effective social work requires practitioners to be able to engage with matters of religion and belief. The paper sets out to explore how social work integrates identities related to religion, belief and spirituality in practice. The intention for this exploration can be contextualized with Crisp's (2017, 2008) work, which often alludes to the fact that social work services lack the capacity to fully meet service user needs, while faith-based organizations complement those services and engage with social issues in the community and service users.

The last 20 years have seen a rising public interest in religion and belief, inclusive of spirituality. Many scholars (e.g. Hodge, 2019; Kvarfordt, Sheridan, & Taylor, 2018; Crisp, 2017; Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres, & Achenbaum, 2015; Furness & Gilligan, 2010) set out to explore this subject and the benefits and disadvantages that are linked with social work practice. Research in sociology and anthropology (e.g. Bowen, 2017; Davie, 2015; Day, 2010; Ammerman, 2006) have largely answered the question of how religion and belief are associated with peoples' experiences. The knowledge we receive from these fields is essential as it informs social work about what is of significance to service users, but for what reason as well. There are, however, more causes that make this dialogue important.

Religion and belief are in the core of social work (Crisp, 2017) and therefore need to be taken into consideration in practice. The history and development of social work is a rich source of information to develop a better understanding of the above statement. Ehrenreich (2014) places the evolution of the profession in the context of social, political and ideological trends, but not exclusive of religious trends. Social work, and particularly practice on the micro and mezzo levels, stem from a set of values which are Christian by character and religious by principle (Todd & Coholic, 2007). Similarly, religious belief and practice have commonly

played a large part in people's motivation to pursue a career in social work (Hackett, Kuronen, Matthies, & Kresal, 2003). Faver (2004) studied the impact of religious and spiritual drives among female social workers and opined that religion and spirituality are aspects which enable individuals to connect with others and build a deeper relationship, which gradually leads to more joyful and satisfactory experiences, as well as increased capacity to care for the other.

To avoid any definitional confusion, before continuing with an investigation of previous research on this subject, it is important that the terms used in this paper are defined. The terms religion, belief, spirituality, faith, as well as nonreligion and nonbelief are used throughout the text, and often interchangeably. This study draws on the concept and theory of religious literacy (Dinham & Francis, 2015; Pentaris, 2019a) to define these terms, and accepts that all refer to a set of values and beliefs one abides by; such may be religious, in a normative sense, or non, in the way scholars attempt to define spirituality in the last two decades. In other words, this paper is not interested in one's spirituality or religion but the reality that people's experiences are unique in that they are defined by their faith or lack thereof in anything that does not comply with scientific explanations of the world. Also, the use of all terms is an attempt to present a work that emphasizes the variety of identities social workers encounter in the field.

Background

Following on from the previous section, a good starting point is to think about the definitional queries associated with this discussion. How are the terms defined and for what purpose? Carroll (1998), some 20 years ago, opined that social workers still lacked a clear definition of spirituality, which impacts on their ability to adequately engage with such aspects of people's identities. Since, there has been a large amount of research undertaken by the subfield of the sociology of religion, which legitimized many of the positions from the 1990s.

Davie's (2015) work, for example, reframed the discussion about the place of religion in the public and revisited the issue of definitions, but with no further success.

It is evident, given the extensive literature on defining religion, belief and spirituality, that offering a definition, especially one that is widely accepted, is almost unrealistic. Drawing on Bregman's (2004) work, it seems more sensible that we embrace the lack of definition and appreciate its advantages; as Bregman (2004) puts it, the term's 'meanings keep slipping and it can be relied on to fill gaps vacated by older terms, while at the same time pull in other meanings from other contexts' (p. 157). This is closely linked with Senreich's (2013) proposition for an all-inclusive definition of spirituality to facilitate a smooth integration of it in social work practice. Senreich is, particularly, suggesting an open definition that could apply in all situations.

A thriving area of research on this subject explores issues related to social work education. Studies have, since the 1990s, explored how religion and spirituality fit into the social work curriculum, but also how students respond to such initiatives; whether in the classroom or the field. Dudley and Helfgott (1990) were of the few first to explore the place of religion and spirituality in social work education. In their work with social work faculty members, they argued that even though scholars of social work suggest there is a rightful place of religion in the curriculum, the process of including it remained underdeveloped.

An equal task was undertaken by Sheridan, Wilmer and Atcheson (1994), who also found social work faculty members feeling ill-equipped to undertake the task of delivering content related to religion or spirituality. Despite the ongoing discussions, however, religion and spirituality remain unattended in the social work curriculum, even till the late 1990s (Russel, 1998; Sheridan & Hemert, 1999), or in the new millennium (Furman, Benson, Grimwood, & Canda, 2004; Kvarfordt et al., 2018; Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018).

Furness and Gilligan (2014), who are two of the leading contemporary scholars in the exploration of the growing relationship of religion and social work in the UK, examined more recently how religion and spirituality are present or absent from conversations that take place in practice. They did this by speaking to social work students who returned from placements and offered to share their experience while in the field. In this study, Furness and Gilligan suggest that there is the tendency, in practice, to avoid discussions about this subject. Therefore, they recommend caution and invite agencies to become more proactive about training their staff to engage appropriately with religion and belief.

Other studies and conceptual accounts that may not have focused on social work education and the place of religion and spirituality in it, have also highlighted the lack of education and training of professionals in social work to better respond to needs pertaining to service users' needs (Sheridan, 2009; Oxhlander & Pargament, 2014; Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018). In their study, Kvarfordt and Herba (2018), for example, report the favorable attitude of Canadian practitioners, towards the integration of religion and spirituality in practice, but emphasize that more than two-thirds of their sample have never or rarely received any formal training or education on the subject.

Research has evolved in other areas as well, exploring how practitioners reflect on the integration of religion and spirituality in practice. One good such example is Gilbert (2000), who examined clinicians', including clinical social workers, views about the place of spirituality in social group work. Clinicians in this work suggest the need for spiritual assessment, as well as self-awareness. Spirituality is described important to social work with groups, and Gilbert stresses the need to revisit the training of clinical social workers in this area. Some ten years later, Hodge (2011), in the same premise, introduced guidelines for clinical social workers that facilitate the integration of spirituality in practice. These guidelines include client preference, research evaluation, clinical expertise and cultural competence; the

focus on these domains, according to Hodge, will support the integration of religion and spiritual in practice. Further, Sheridan's (2009) literature review on ethical issues and spiritually based interventions in social work surfaced the need for more structured interventions and models which will enable professionals to practice more effectively.

The need for developing methods of spiritual assessment has been visited by Furness and Gilligan (2010) as well. The authors proposed the Furness/ Gilligan Framework for Spiritual Assessment, which they piloted with social work students. The outcomes were positive but limited (i.e. reflections were received only from graduate social work students from the authors' institutions, and suggested the effectiveness of the framework but with the need to assemble better); nevertheless, their study evidences further the need to enhance the social work curriculum with matters of religion and spirituality to better prepare students to enter the profession.

Further, following the literature review by Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) that emphasized the lack of guidance for professionals, regarding the integration of spirituality in practice, Oxhandler et al. (2015) examined how licensed social workers in the USA perceive the place of religion and spirituality in practice; specifically, whether integration is feasible and useful. At large, the authors found that social workers appear positive about the integration of religion in practice and identified the significance in doing so. Yet, simultaneously, but not surprisingly given previous research, practitioners equally suggested that they do not feel equipped or otherwise prepared to do so.

There have been multiple attempts, by various authors, to separate religion and spirituality and argue the need for the separation. Some of these recommendations seem positive and some more challenging. Crisp (2008), for example, proposes a framework in which spirituality is a lived experience. She recommends that avoiding strong religious language may encourage further discussions in this area of practice and move away from a

secular-orientated approach. This suggestion may be positive to an extent, but sets aside room for avoidance, too. Further, Seinfeld (2012) recommends the total separation of religion from spirituality and the mere focus of practice on spirituality as an inclusive term. Similar to Crisp's (2008) suggestion, this approach indicates room for avoidance.

This study moved beyond the exploration of religion in the curriculum and with students. It investigated how professional social workers facilitate service users' religion and spirituality in their everyday practice. To my knowledge, little research is available to this extent, which makes this study all the more important. Sheridan's (2004) work in the US is a good paradigm which reflects what this study intended to do. Sheridan identified the limited literature regarding what practitioners do in the field and how they approach this subject but opined that US social workers engaged with the subject but not always in a healthy way (i.e. efficient). Equally, Gilligan and Furness's (2006) study was a good start in the UK. The authors surveyed both students and Qualified Social Workers about their views regarding the place of religion and spirituality in social work.

Methodology

This study used in-depth interviewing (Bryman (2016) to collect data from 34 Qualified Social Workers who are in practice either in the public, private or voluntary sectors. Participants were recruited from across England to represent views and practices from various geographical locations. To enrich the data, the study followed guidelines by Creswell (2007) and employed a qualitative investigational perspective to its research design. This method enabled the researcher to interrogate not only the findings in isolation, but also their interrelation. Ethical approval was granted by the author's previous institution (i.e. Bucks New University), when the study was conducted, and reapproved by the author's current institution (i.e. University of Greenwich).

The data was collected between June 2016 and April 2017. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and one hour and 15 minutes, and participants were asked questions such as ‘how do they take into account religious and spiritual identities of service users when planning for their care’. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Themes started emerging from early on which were then explored further as more data were becoming available. This was in line with the inductive approach to qualitative data (Thomas, 2006) and the iterative process of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Respondent validity was used to ensure the reliability of thematic analysis.

A call for participants went out through online forums, university links with social work agencies and more directly with independent social workers via their British Association of Social Workers (BASW) contact cards. Following an initial contact with individuals who were interested to partake, and confirmation of the eligibility for participation (registered and practicing in England), an informed consent was agreed, and a time and date were scheduled for the interview to take place, in the social worker’s workspace.

Sample

The call for participants reached more than 3,000 practicing social workers in England. The study comprised 34 qualified and practicing social workers (Table 1); 16 male social workers and 18 females, per identification. Most participants were between the ages of 30 and 65, with 11-20 years of practice and were practicing either in the City of London or in the Greater London county (41.1%). At large, participants identified either as Christian (47%) or non-religious (35.4%). Further, 88.3% of the participants have not received any training or education on religion and/or spirituality (Figure 1). Much of the sample (n=24) were employed in the public sector, by a Local Authority, while only female participants were employed by private agencies (Tables 1 & 2).

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Reflexivity

Dean (2017, p.114) argues that ‘the subjectivities of the researcher affect their output, [...], and also in the writing-up process and in the interpretation of the findings’. It is for this reason that during the research process, the researcher’s beliefs and experience in social work practice were taken into account. Even though I was brought up in Orthodoxy, questioning my own religious belief, from an early age, and primarily because it was given to me, gave me the opportunity to read and learn much about various other religions. In that journey, I converted to Buddhism, but never committed to many practices, yet remained spiritual. This experience is present when I interpret my data, yet managed with keeping a diary of research analysis, as well as inviting an independent external researcher to scrutinize the organizing and presenting of the findings.

Similarly, my previous experience in social work practice is key when appreciating how social workers integrate religion, belief and spirituality in their practice. However, my own experience is vastly different from that of my research participants (international versus domestic), hence easier to separate and objectively scrutinize the data.

Findings

The study concluded with two themes as those emerged in response to the query, ‘How social workers integrate religion, belief and spirituality in their practice’; professionals adopt either an *avoidant* or a *utilitarian* approach in practice.

Tendency to avoid

Despite the attempts to attend to religious and spiritual matters, participants suggested that religion is a very sensitive and contested area which should not be addressed in practice. By doing so, participants suggested that there are risks of distressing service users or imposing personal views and beliefs onto the service user.

Running Head: Integrating religion and belief in social work practice

There is the fear that if you start talking about religion and spirituality, you might start imposing on people. You know it could come across as preaching or badgering, so sometimes, I would say that I think it is best if we left it [religion] at the door (social worker 16, religious affiliation).

I would not bring it up unless it was absolutely necessary; to do with child protection for example (social worker 12, religious affiliation).

So, I feel like one should avoid discussing this topic out of risk of creating tensions (social worker 1, religious affiliation).

Utilitarian response

Professionals mused that the information about religion and belief or spirituality is collected and added in the service user's file, along with other demographic information, and retrieved when necessary with regards to resolving pragmatic issues. Social workers who partook in this study expressed the tendency towards a utilitarian response to religion and belief, which is required by national and organisational policy and is easily measured.

It almost hits the radar of the organization when an issue is raised. Like, for example, if somebody is of a certain faith and their family does not want them to eat a certain food, like sausages, but the service user wants to, then this is challenging. It is important to address religion when such practical issues arise (social worker 33, religious affiliation).

Contextualizing the methods of integration

In addition, the study highlights the times when the topics of religion and spirituality become pertinent to practice and professionals find important to explore. These times are categorized under assessment and intervention, which reflect two of the main dimensions of social work practice, and depict the situations when professionals adopt either an *avoidant* or *utilitarian* practice approach.

Assessment

Participants, in the clear majority (94%), shared that a way of exemplifying engagement with religion, belief and spiritual identities of service users is by filling in the right sections in forms, and especially during the initial assessment.

Well, the secular part of the society says that you can ask it, but it does not really matter, and you tick the box on something and then you think it is addressed (social worker 4, religious affiliation).

I think, you know when we are carrying out a best interest assessment, or care assessment, there is always the demographics, and it does seem like the checkbox exercise (social worker 20, religious affiliation).

There were two social workers among the research participants, though, who suggested that when gathering information during the initial assessment, the topic of ‘belief’ is discussed comprehensively. These two social workers highlighted the importance of exploring one’s beliefs at the beginning phases of the working relationship yet did not think it as significant to engage in an ongoing dialogue about this subject. Lack of the latter, as we will see in the discussion later, presupposes that one’s beliefs do not change or that they are not a concept of lived experience.

Intervention

Conditional intervention. Participants, at large, offered that whether they discuss religion, belief or spirituality, with service users, is dependent on two main factors; the discussion is initiated and led by the service user, and it will only materialize if the social worker has a long-term relationship with the service user.

Service user-led discussions. More than 80% of the participants claimed that having such discussions in their practice was primarily the concern of the people they work with.

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Specifically, social workers who partook in this study suggested that if a service user wishes to discuss religious or spiritual matters, then they (i.e. professionals) are willing to engage in a dialogue with them. However, this is dependent on capacity and general availability.

We would not particularly focus on someone's religion, unless it is something they are bringing up in the conversation (social worker 24, no religious affiliation).

It is not something we necessarily overtly ask people about. So, we are not always, I suppose, aware of their needs. It is usually in conversation that someone will say, 'Oh, I am at Church and this is what I do there'. And, this is how we pick it up (social worker 12, religious affiliation).

Long-term relationship. Equally, participants suggested that with follow up conversations and continuous professional relationships with service users, ideas or concerns about religion, belief or nonbelief and nonreligion might emerge. Such are then explored in conversation.

If someone who was atheist and they went away for a week, and then they came back and were starting to express some devout Christian ideas, I might explore with them, 'Is this what makes you unwell?', 'Where is this coming from?' Otherwise, it is not relevant to practice (social worker 33, religious affiliation).

Referrals

Chaplaincy and religious leaders. A further practice by which professionals in the field exemplified their engagement with religion, belief and spiritual identities was the referral to a chaplain or other religious leaders in the community. It was evident from this study that social workers, more and more, appreciate their skillset in offering religious- and spiritual-sensitive practice as lacking. However, not something to be concerned about as the roles and responsibilities are slowly transferring to chaplains.

The person that would be most appropriate to speak to, would be a chaplain. On several occasions, it has been a chaplain, or a pastor, because that has been identified as the most appropriate person by the authority. So, the chaplain can help promote the person's care plan to go to the Church, for example (social worker 30, no religious affiliation).

Risk management and safeguarding

The discussion with the research participants was extensive around the issues of safeguarding and protection. Social workers who took part in this study, at large, agreed that religion and belief are issues that need be taken into serious consideration when impacting health and safety. This, though, raises the question, 'How and when do professionals become aware of such impact, when religion and belief are not subjects openly discussed with service users, or the discussion of which is conditional as we saw earlier?'

Sometimes, people's belief may be dangerous to themselves or others; especially with children and families. When such issues come up, then we explore it (social worker 33, religious affiliation).

With some families that do not look after their kids well and when their beliefs and religion do not promote a safe environment for the kids, then this is explored. It is a safeguarding issue and we have to manage the risks (social worker 14, no religious affiliation).

It is worth noting that only social workers who practice in the areas of children and families, specifically in the public sector and in the following teams: multi-agency safeguarding hub, looked after children, adoption and fostering, and children with complex needs, mentioned that religion and belief are relevant and explored when risk is identified. Social workers who practice with adults or areas outside of statutory children's services overall, did not make such mentions.

Avoidant and Utilitarian Approaches in Practice: Challenges

These two approaches (i.e. *avoidant* and *utilitarian*) are congruent with previous findings regarding religious illiteracy or the lack of religious literacy (Pentaris, 2018, 2019b) both with social work and other health and social care professionals. Lack of religious literacy in professional practice, according to Dinham and Francis (2015), rejects the possibility for holistic care and enables practice to be generalized. This is not far from Pentaris' (2019b) findings in end of life care, which include social workers; in the attempt to be inclusive of all faiths, practice turns to be either avoidant or neutral, and, equally, in the attempt to expertise practice, professionals are trained with generalist knowledge, but not with skills to negotiate the suitability of their knowledge on an individual basis.

These two approaches in practice, in relation to religion, belief and spirituality, have been highlighted in Pentaris and Thomsen (2018), who explored, in a cross-countries analysis, the extent to which professionals meet service user needs related to religion, faith and culture, and how effective their practice is. This further emphasizes the need for exploring the effectiveness of such approaches and planning of new policies or furthering training. To do so, it is important to discuss the times when these two approaches emerge in practice and identify possible challenges.

Assessment

Practitioners in this study refer to information gathering about a service user's religion or other beliefs as an exercise that is associated with the completion of paperwork; somewhat reminiscent of Dustin's work (2016) about *The McDonaldization of Social Work*. Dustin's thesis was, also, not far from Finch's arguments, in the 1970s, hence not unfamiliar.

Finch (1976) examined the tensions between social work practice and the increasing introduction of bureaucracy to the everyday life of social workers, in which examination, he made clear that tasks such as form-filling, deprive social work practice from its autonomy, and create professionals who are more concerned about the organisational demands rather than

service user needs. To the contrary, two practitioners' views in this study reflect the exploration of this area with service users, but without the intention to integrate it in ongoing work with them, emphasized by Crisp (2017) as well.

Intervention

Findings from this study reveal that professionals expect that discussions about religion, belief and spirituality need be service user-led, and on the basis of a long-term relationship. A service user-led discussion allows the service user to be the facilitator of the work and actively contribute to it; an approach that not only identifies a key social work principle (i.e. dignity and respect, see British Association for Social Workers, 2014), but also is embedded in the overall ethics of the profession (Banks, 2012). However, this approach is not without concerns.

Specifically, there are two main issues that link with professionals relying on service user-led discussions. First, this suggests that discussing one's faith, whether spiritual, religious or none of the above, is the product of one's capacity to do so, both mental and verbal. Feltham (1995) discussed extensively the limitations of talking therapies or verbal approaches to practice and the risk of excluding certain parts of the population, who may be in equally vulnerable circumstances. Next, for service users to initiate and facilitate such discussions, the right space (Fook & Pease, 2016) should be offered to do so. In other words, this discussion and the success of it, appear to depend on the social worker's ability to build trust and an honest relationship, in which the service user will feel comfortable to start the discussion.

The condition of a long-term relationship with the service user is also not without challenges. Dominelli (2004), some 15 years ago, looked at the dilemmas and tensions faced by social workers in their daily professional life. Inclusive of these was the lack of resources and time, most importantly, to build strong and trustworthy relationships with service users. Dominelli's argument was not highlighted for the first time, nor for the last. Sarangi and Slembrouck (2014) examined both professional language and bureaucracy and their input as

barriers in the social workers' attempt to address sensitive areas in practice, as well as build strong relationships. This is reflective, once again, of Dustin's (2016) take on the MacDonaldization of social work and the shift from *care* to *case management*. When such discussions become dependent on a long-term relationship, and one that is supposedly positive, it follows logic that all service users who do not have a positive relationship with their social worker and those who do not get the chance to nurture a long-term relationship with them, are disadvantaged.

In addition to this, McKendrick and Finch (2017) explore high measures of security and social work, with a focus on the loss of space and resources to practice social work in its fully capacity. In other words, and reminiscing Jeyasingham's (2016) ethnographic study in children social work services, agile working (i.e. current popular conditions that want social workers in open plan offices and hotdesking, with limited to no privacy or stability) impacts on social work practice in that it does not allow professionals the luxury of relationship-based social work practice or the space to establish rapport and confidence in the working relationship with service users.

Last, it is not uncommon that social work positions are not always permanent or filled in permanently (Carey, 2011). This coupled with social workers often choosing independent or locum practice, and the increasing mobility in employment, it is unlikely that professional positions project enough stability to enable long-term relationships between social workers and service users. This said, if integration of religion, belief and spirituality in practice is dependent on a long-term relationship, it may be utopian to think of, or exceptional to the rule, hence, pressing to address in the future as it suggests lack of equity.

Another way by which professionals exemplify the integration of religion, belief and spirituality in their practice, is the referrals to religious leaders in the community. An apparent challenge with this is the dependency on such sources in the community. Indeed, one of the

key social work skills is *networking* (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2016) and this offers the need to draw on multiple resources and make successful referrals. Yet, if this is one of the main and technical approaches to ‘resolve’ religion, belief and spiritual needs of service users, first, how will it be ‘resolved’ if the network is not available, and, next, does this referral suggest that religion, belief and spirituality are not relevant to the social worker’s role? The latter has been answered exhaustively by various scholars, including Crisp (2008, 2017), Canda and Furman (2009), Furness and Gilligan (2009) and Joseph (1988).

Last, considering religion, belief and spirituality at times of risk management and protection issues is not surprising if one reminisces Gilligan’s (2009) work. Gilligan’s study found that religion and belief are considered when safeguarding issues arise, but concluded that primarily, professionals adopt a ‘religion-blind’ or ‘belief-blind’ approach to practice (Gilligan, 2009, abstract). However, recent examples, such as the case study in Tedam and Adjoa (2017), show us that lack of integration and, therefore, understanding of a service user’s beliefs and values, whether religious or not, may lead to serious impact on a child. This is not to recommend that one’s beliefs should override safeguarding policies, but prevention is equally important with intervention.

Discussion

This study aimed at exploring in depth the ways in which social work professionals attend to service user needs related to religion, belief and/or spirituality; inclusive of nonreligion, nonbelief, or otherwise self-identification. The data gathered was best understood via the lens of religious literacy (Dinham & Francis, 2015), as well as the impact of religious illiteracy in practice (i.e. religious microinvalidations, Pentaris, 2018) (also see Hodge, 2019 for an exploration of spiritual microaggressions). In the attempt to contextualize this discussion, the following points are important to make.

At large, social workers consent that faith itself, either religious or not, becomes a means to understanding its very place in social work. Looking deeper into the history and development of the social work profession (Healy, 2008), it is evident that the profession's values and principles, such as social solidarity, human rights, equity and non-judgment, stem largely from those of religion – particularly Christianity – while the intention to support others whose circumstances deem them vulnerable is the ethos of all religious denominations (Siporin, 1986). Equally important is that belief and spirituality often act as motivators for individuals to enter the profession. This position is congruent with Healy's (2008) argument about religious and political forces which led to the formation of social work as a profession, but also Garland, Myers and Wolfer's (2008) work about the involvement of religious volunteers to carry out social work tasks.

In the risk of reinventing the wheel, people's motivation to pursue and practice social work is of importance when trying to understand how they approach the way service users associate with their own faith. Professionals' approaches are, subconsciously, informed by their held views and perceptions, despite the immense effort to neutralize practice from emotions and the professional's positionality. As Rose (2009) writes about the politics of life itself, views, perceptions and emotionality are all processes, while products of the processes themselves. In other words, it is utopian to think that a 100% non-subjective approach can ever exist; to approach practice one cannot be neutral unless neutrality constitutes the sum of social constructions that inform the professional's experience, inclusive of religion or the experience of irreligion. Both sociologists and anthropologists have long examined this and opined that past experiences, as well as self-identification (also see Goffman, 1968), or how the latter impacts on its ongoing process, all play a part in the way we make decisions or relate to own and others' circumstances.

It is apparent from this study that the profession's involvement into a set of statutory duties, at most, poses limitations to the possibility of adequately addressing religion, belief and spirituality in practice. It is without doubt that adequate and comprehensive exploration of religion in practice falls under the value of human rights and principles pertaining to dignity and freedom, yet how is this challenge to be answered when statutory duties seem to predominate the role of a social worker in contemporary practice (also see Munro, 2004)?

Despite this, social workers appear to appreciate that religion and belief are integral to individual assessments for two major reasons. First, when safeguarding issues are of concern, and next, when practical issues are resolved by drawing on one's faith. Thinking about safeguarding issues, this seems rather uncanny. If religion, belief or spirituality may be indicators for safeguarding matters, exploring them once an issue arises is an approach leaning more towards intervention. Yet, what about preventative measures? If one's religion, for example, can inform an assessment and offer a better insight of the service user's circumstances, why is it not looked at in advance?

This discussion is built in the proviso that the findings of this study are indeed referring to ways of approaching the subject in practice. However, the findings may equally be surfacing coping strategies instead and suggest a more pressing need for enhanced training and education in religious literacy.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The vast number of different views, beliefs and nonbeliefs, which directly inform people's everyday experience, suggest that social work practitioners are increasingly in need of advancing their skills and knowledge to better respond to the ongoing religious changes in society. This study offers additional evidence that the integration of religion, belief and spirituality in social work is still lacking, however the many and impactful initiatives. Social work education and training appear to be an important area for exploration; to enable both

social work students and practitioners to increase their knowledge and understanding in this area, which will enhance positive outcomes for service users. Specifically, practical skills on how to engage and facilitate service user identities related to religion, belief and spirituality are in demand, and social workers' comprehension of the benefits of belief, and not only the risks (e.g. focus on risk management and protection), deems important.

Further, it is important that further consideration is given to the possibility of rebalancing resilience and vulnerability in professionals, and via supervision empower practitioners to enhance their insight about religious plurality and diversification of identities related to religion, belief, spirituality, nonreligion and so on. This is a clear implication for practice, following on from this study, which will have great impact on the quality of care received at the frontline.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not without its limitations. It is difficult to generalize the findings; first, because of the small-sized sample and the low response rate. Approximately half the sample size stated no religion, atheist or secular, and even though the study did not explore what participants meant by those identities, this is telling that interest in this principle of practice is not merely of concern to those who are religious. Next, because of the geographical location of the study, these findings may be specific to the socio-political context of social work practice in England, which may differ from other countries. Yet, this study formulates a basis upon which other contexts can be explored. Further to the limitations, this study reports on knowledge deriving primarily from social workers employed in the public sector; this limits the findings primarily to this area and the statutory duties of social work. Studies in the voluntary sector may reveal a lot more flexibility in the ways in which religion, belief and spirituality are integrated.

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