

Religion, beliefs and culturally competent social work practice

Sheila Furness¹

Summary: Over the past forty years, Britain has witnessed a decline in religious attendance, observance and worship, particularly within the Christian faith. This social trend is also starting to affect second generation Punjabi Sikhs and Gujarati Hindus. For others, in particular, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims, religion is central to how many conduct and live their lives.

A small-scale survey was carried out with social work students studying in Bradford, England to elicit their views about the impact of faith and beliefs on practice. National and local statistics provide a picture of the make-up of the local population by ethnicity and religion.

A questionnaire was used to find out the importance of their religious belief, if any, to determine any anxieties in relation to placement, to provide examples of any conflicts or ethical dilemmas concerning religious beliefs and practice and to suggest ways of preparing and equipping social workers to work with diverse faiths and communities.

It appears that religion and spirituality is a neglected area of social work. This preliminary work suggests the need for further research in a number of areas in order to promote culturally competent practice.

Key words:

1. Lecturer and Admissions Tutor, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Bradford

Address for Correspondence: Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP. s.furness@bradford.ac.uk

Background

Social work in Britain takes place in a diverse society made up of people ranging from those for whom religious beliefs and traditions determine and dominate their whole way of life above all else to those who would say that it had little or no influence on their actions and behaviour.

A small-scale survey was carried out with social work students on two different social work programmes to identify the possible impact of faith and beliefs on students' practice. The findings were presented at a workshop at the 2nd International Conference on Practice Teaching and Field Education held in London in April 2003. At the same time, Gilligan (forthcoming) presented his findings of work with practice teachers to explore related issues.

Britain has witnessed over the past forty years declining numbers of people who attend church, predominantly of Christian denomination. As part of the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities, Modood et al (1997) collected and analysed data on the importance of religion amongst white and ethnic minority groups. They considered the relationship between the impact of British socialisation on religious observance and the length of residence in Britain. They found noticeable differences between first and second generation Punjabi Sikhs and Gujarati Hindus and their levels of participation in faith activities. This was in contrast to Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims who still placed religion central to their lives. Some Muslim participants in the study acknowledged tensions between religious teaching and actual behaviour.

Reasons for this apparent loss of affiliation and overt commitment to religion are complex. It is not the intention of this article to consider the historical factors and possible explanations for this cultural shift but it is important to acknowledge the current position and importance of religion for the different sectors of those living in Britain.

Census 2001 statistics provide key information about the numbers and ethnic make-up of Britain as a whole and regional variations based on ethnicity and religion. In 2001, the total population of the United Kingdom approached 60 million people. The size of the minority

ethnic population was 4.6 million or 7.9% of the overall population.

In terms of regional distribution, minority ethnic groups are more likely to live in England and are concentrated in the large urban areas of London, West Midlands, South East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber. Although Indians are the largest minority group making up 1.8% of the total population, Leicester had the highest proportion of 25.7%. Therefore it is important to consider the locality of settlement as some areas will have larger numbers of minority ethnic groups than others.

In 2001, the Census collected information about religion for the first time. Interestingly, approximately three quarters of the UK population reported having a religion. Christianity was the largest group with 71.6 %, followed by Muslims (3%), Hindus (1%), Sikhs (0.6%), Jews (0.5%), Buddhists (0.3%) and people of other religions (0.3%).

As this student survey was carried out in Bradford, it is important to compare national and regional statistics to gain a more accurate local picture. The total population of Bradford is 467,665 and of these approximately 8% did not answer the question about religion, 13% stated they had no religion, 60% said they were Christian, 16% were Muslim, 1% were Sikh, 1% were Hindu, 0.1% were Buddhist, 0.1% were Jewish and 0.2% were other religions (National Statistics, 2003).

Bradford District population trends indicate that Bradford's Black and Asian communities will grow by some 52,000 residents. This means an increase from 19% in 1996 to between 25-33% of the total local population by 2011 (Bradford Metropolitan District Council, 1996). This will have implications regarding the numbers of people identifying themselves with a particular denomination.

Although Bradford has a significant Muslim population, an added complexity is the misconception that all Muslims and Asians are a homogeneous group and that they share very similar traditions and customs. Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims in Birmingham, Punjabi Sikhs and Gujarati Hindus in Southall and 'white British' people are all subject to 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' assumptions that relate to these different perspectives (Modood et al, 1994). Lewis (2002) traces the dynamic nature of sectarian Muslim communities in Bradford from early immigration to present day. A picture emerges of the commonalities, differences and separate nature of these diverse

communities. Boundaries have been set around language, education, place of origin, local geographical location, gender, leadership and allegiance to homeland. All of these factors and more impact on these different communities' sense of identity and shape their individual and collective actions and conduct.

Although people may claim to belong to a particular religion, behaviours associated with belonging to a faith differ considerably amongst believers and change over time. As an example, in 1999 in this country almost half of all adults over 18 who belonged to or were brought up in a religion have never or practically never attended a religious service. Only 13% of all women and 10% of men attended a religious service at least once a week (Social Trends, 2001). Although there are variations in religious belief, people still look to religious tradition and ritual for ways of celebrating and mourning key events through the life course (Hockey & James, 2003; Modood et al, 1994; Beit-Hallahimi & Argyle, 1997).

In 2003, the make-up of the local population of Bradford reflects the patterns of movement and settlement by early and later migrants to the city and surrounding areas. The focus of this article is to consider the prevalence of the diverse faiths within Bradford and to acknowledge the importance of faith for those living and working in this area. The findings of the students' questionnaire will now be examined to detect possible connections between student social worker's perceptions of the impact of their or others' faith and beliefs on practice.

Findings of student questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent out to 86 social work students who were at different stages of their two, three or four year training programmes. Forms were anonymous to encourage student's to share any privately held views more freely about their religious beliefs. Twenty-two students returned the forms. There could be several reasons for the low return rate. Questionnaires were posted to students on one programme and the timing of this coincided with the end of the course when some students were leaving the local area and may not have received the questionnaires at their local addresses. On the other

programme students were handed the questionnaire when collecting marked work. Some students will forget to return questionnaires and others may not be interested in the topic and therefore less inclined to take part in the study. Students on the second programme knew the researcher and this prompted the higher number of returns.

Within the sample, there were 3 male students and 19 female students. This is representative of social work education as generally females outnumber men on social work training courses (GSCC, 2002).

Thirteen students aged 21-25 years completed the questionnaire, 3 students aged 26-30 years, 4 students aged 31-35 years, 1 student aged 36-40 years and 1 student aged 41-49 years. Again as a point of comparison, national trends show that currently there are significantly more mature students (about 80% over 25 years of age) who register for social work training in England (GSCC, 2002).

The two sample groups were different in that one programme was based at a Higher and Further Education college and students undertook a two-year Diploma in Social Work. While students on the college course tend to be mature and live locally as a consequence of other family responsibilities. The other sample was drawn from a three and four year degree course, which included the Diploma in Social Work at a University. These students comprise locally recruited as well as younger students from outside of the local area. In terms of ethnicity, one would expect there to be some correlation with the make-up of the local population. In the total sample, there were 14 white students, 3 Asian-Pakistani students, 1 Asian-Bangladeshi student, 1 Asian UK student, 1 Vietnamese student, 1 British Muslim student, 1 Dual Heritage Irish/black Caribbean student.

As a point of comparison with local figures, 82% are white and between 18 to retirement age, 12.5% are Pakistani and Bangladeshi of working age and 1.3% of other ethnic origin (Chief Executive's Research Section 1997). This compares with 64% white students, 27% Pakistani and Bangladeshi students and 9% of other ethnic origin. This sample reflects higher numbers of people of working age from minority ethnic groups and less white students.

More monitoring needs to be carried out to determine the exact numbers of students from different ethnic groups training to become social workers on particular programmes. It may be that in this sample

those students from particular ethnic backgrounds and religions were more motivated to return their questionnaire than other white or less religious students.

Of this sample, 3 students did not specify a denomination but identified themselves as Christian, four were Church of England, two were Catholic, one was Pentecostal/evangelical and five did not state any religion. Muslim students identified themselves as Sunni (4), Hanifi (1) and Shia (1). One student stated no religious belief.

In an attempt to measure the extent of a student's religious belief, students were asked to indicate using a scale how religious they were. Students responded:

Yes, very	2
Yes, quite	6
Yes, a little	6
No, not very	1
No, not at all	6
Have a strong faith rather than being religious	1

Overall, 14 students had some interest in religion as indicated by using 'very', 'quite' and 'a little religious'. One student stated having a strong faith rather than being religious. 8 students indicated that they were 'not very' or 'not at all religious'. Of the younger students (under 25 years) 8 stated some level of interest in religion as opposed to 3 older students. Terminology associated with religion and spirituality is ambiguous. It was not within the scope of this study to test out the strength of belief of an individual student. Attempts have been made to assess the spiritual needs of service users in health and social care settings (Ross, 1997; Tuck et al, 1992) and workers' perceptions of the spiritual needs of those in their care and their responses to providing spiritual care (Ross, 1994). However, the literature indicates the problematic nature of definition, measurement and correlation to well-being and quality of life (Cobb & Robshaw, 1998; MacKinley, 2001).

Modood et al (1997) found that of those people indicating that religion was 'very important' there were 74% Muslim, 43% Hindu, 46% Sikh, 11% white Church of England and 32% white Catholic.

Those expressing religion as 'not important' were 11% Hindu, 14% Sikh, 4% Muslim, 53% white Church of England and 32% white Catholic. Research has shown that religion is less valued by young people of nearly all faiths, excepting New Protestants and Sikhs and valued more by those aged over 50 (Modood et al, 1997, p.301) This is not the case with this student sample. Although this is only a small study and not representative, it may be that, for some, the motivation to choose social work as a career is driven by a desire to help others based on religiosity. This would be worthy of further exploration, perhaps using in-depth qualitative interviews with students.

An important element of social work training is the placement. Students were asked to identify, from a given list, if they had any anxieties in relation to placement. Those concerns which are directly relevant to this article:- racism, appearance/dress, religious festivals, ethical dilemmas and expectations will be considered in the next section.

Student anxieties

Five students (23%) indicated some anxiety in relation to racism on placement. Of these, two were Asian Pakistani males aged 31-35 and 21-25, one was a white British female aged 36-40 and two female Asian Pakistani females aged 31-35 and 21-25. It is not clear whether the students were concerned about possible racism from service users, colleagues or 'others'. Penketh's study of black students' experiences on placement provides evidence of the prevalence of racist attitudes encountered from practice teachers, other social workers as well as service users.

'Black students interviewed were concerned that there was an assumption that they could work effectively with any black client regardless of gender, religion or other cultural differences, and that because they were black they were automatically 'race' specialists' (Penketh, 2000, p.134). Assumptions can also be drawn from the study that Asian students working with Asian service users will not experience racism or other difficulties based on difference. However, in practice differences in language, class, caste, religion and religious

Practice teachers and tutors should be concerned if a student displayed certain behaviours. A few years ago, one student, who was a committed Christian openly discussed in supervision with her practice teacher that she had prayed with a service user. This may be acceptable when instigated by the service user but concerns should be raised if the behaviour has been initiated by the student. Sheridan and Amato-Von Hermert (1999) identified a number of religious and spiritual interventions to determine the likelihood and appropriateness of social work students using these in practice. Their study found that over 30% of students had used 4 of the 14 interventions and over 60% believed 10 out of the 14 of these interventions were appropriate. Interventions that had been utilised by students ranged from collecting information about client's religious practices, recommending participation in religious programmes, praying privately for a client and using religious or spiritual language or concepts. Furness and Gilligan (forthcoming) will be comparing data based on this American study with responses by British social work students and practitioners.

Ten students (46%) indicated an anxiety about the expectations of them. One student commented 'Expectations are high on DipSW but so they should be'.

Another student felt that there could be better placement preparation. The new social work degree demands that students are assessed in key practice skill areas prior to placement. As a minimum, students will have to shadow social workers in order to develop some understanding of their role and ensuing responsibilities as well as gain an insight into service users' and carers' experiences. The institution will have a greater responsibility to prepare students, not only in teaching the knowledge base but also working with agencies and practitioners to develop professional skills and understanding about conduct, behaviour and values in practice (DOH, 2002). In the Yorkshire region, it is now standard practice for social work students to attend informal visits to placements in order to meet the practice teacher and discuss the range of work on offer. This does alleviate many anxieties. All Yorkshire programmes have also adopted a standard placement agreement which is drawn up at a formal meeting with the student, practice teacher and tutor, normally prior to the start of the placement. Again this meeting aims to clarify expectations in respect of assessment, supervision and support. It is

sect will affect the student and service user relationship.

More research needs to be carried out both with students, practitioners and service users from representative groups to establish how practice is affected.

In respect to appearance/dress three students, two white females and one British Muslim female cited this as a worry. One white student qualified this as a general concern about what to wear on placement. The Muslim student identified a lack of understanding from workers about the significance of wearing a headscarf (hijab) and attitudes conveyed non-verbally by other workers. A number of examples relating to school uniforms and work attire have been reported where there has been a lack of understanding of religious and cultural traditions. Minority groups can feel obliged to conform in order to 'fit in' and accept the prevalent norms. A recent study showed that having to conform to wearing a uniform was problematic for Bangladeshi parents when advising their children about nursing as a career choice (Darr, 2001).

One Asian male student commented that it had been difficult to find enough time for thought and prayer whilst on placement. During Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours and can only eat and drink before daybreak and after sunset. Practising Muslim students will need to pray at certain times during the day. Placement agencies need to give some thought to how existing office arrangements could be utilised to provide some privacy for this purpose.

Students were asked to provide any examples of any conflicts or ethical dilemmas they had to resolve relating to their personal religious beliefs and practice. Most students appeared to have had no issues to raise in connection with this. Three students provided examples of relative issues.

One female student who was Pentecostal/evangelical stated that other professionals had assumed that her faith would adversely affect the quality of her work. She gave examples of how abortion and euthanasia were in conflict with her religious beliefs and social work values, but commented that she would accept a person's right to choice and self-determination. Gilligan's work (forthcoming) shows that often practice teachers choose to either ignore tackling some of these issues with their students or can make massive assumptions where students show commitment to a religion that it will negatively affect their working practices with service users.

clear from the responses that students do have genuine worries about levels and adequacy of support (27%) and supervision (36%) whilst on placement.

An interesting point was raised by one Asian male student who expressed difficulties talking to other Asian men about the role of a social worker and challenging their stereotypes of social workers as 'interferers' within the family. No study has investigated Asian families views and understanding of social work. This type of work could be beneficial to help to challenge some of the myths about social work and maybe attract more Asian people into the profession.

Finally students were asked for ideas of how to better prepare and equip social workers to work with people from diverse faiths and communities.

17 out of 22 students (77%) offered ideas about this. Of those not making any comments, three were quite religious and two not at all.

Some comments overlapped and common themes included providing knowledge about different faiths in order to provide students with a better understanding of different faiths and cultures and how this may influence their value base. This could be achieved by including a course on religious and ethnicity awareness, providing written information, inviting speakers from diverse faiths and communities to speak to students in order to hear different perspectives, display positive images and explore the positive contributions that diverse faiths make, encourage mixing with other groups of people and generally placing a greater emphasis on these issues. Social work programmes also need to create opportunities to promote a greater awareness of the impact of identity and an appreciation of our own and others' culture in our dealings with one another.

Conclusions

There does not seem to have been any systematic audit of the content of social work education in this country in terms of collecting data on how much attention is given to either the value or importance of religion within the curriculum. More attention has been given to this topic in America. Derezotes (1995) suggested that religious and

spiritual values influence assessment and intervention strategies and therefore it was important to consider how to best develop religious and spiritually sensitive practice. Sheridan and Amato-Von Hemert (1999) carried out a survey with 208 students in two American schools of social work. They collected views on the curriculum using two different rationales, one argument was to include religious and spiritual content because of its relevance to multicultural diversity and the other was to promote the importance of spirituality as another dimension of well-being. Although both positions were accepted, the first rationale was more highly favoured by 92.8% as opposed to 71.6% for the second rationale by the sample. Canda has been instrumental in promoting and developing resources on religious and spiritual issues for social work programmes (Canda, 1989; Canda & Furman, 1999).

In 1998, Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) as the awarding and regulatory body of social work in Britain published a range of literature to promote equal opportunities and antiracism in social work. As part of this series, consideration was given to the implications of the beliefs and practices of minority faiths for social work practice. Patel et al (1998: ii) did acknowledge that 'religious cultural practices, group and individual spirituality, religious divisions and religion as therapy have had no place in social work education and practice.' The authors advocated for a more informed understanding of religious differences and ethnic influences to better prepare social workers for a plural society.

Although this preliminary study poses more questions than it provides answers, it does highlight some important issues for further exploration. The findings of this small sample seem to agree with other studies carried out in America and New Zealand (Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999; Nash & Stewart, 2002) that there is an interest in studying religion and spirituality as part of social work education and training. Whether students are believers or non-believers does not seem to matter as both acknowledge the importance of understanding faith issues in order to better work with diverse communities. Social workers need to understand the importance and significance of rites of passage through the life cycle to assist people at critical stages. The social work curriculum does demand that human growth and behaviour is taught to students (DOH, 2002). An understanding and

awareness of how to deal with the challenges presented at different life stages lends itself very well to not only exploring the impact of religion and beliefs but also, other aspects of diversity. Students need to understand systems theory and the importance of support for those at critical stages or in crisis. Religion can provide an important source of support for many. Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) draw on several studies to show that members of religious congregations are more satisfied with their lives as a whole compared to non-members. They cite a study by Shams and Jackson (1993) who found that mosque membership and social support by the community were key factors in assisting individuals under stress to cope better with their situation. However, those same faith groups whilst enhancing community cohesion and social support for its members can result in a separation and isolation from those of other faiths and ethnicities (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997, p.229). The challenge for social work is to be able to tap into those valuable support systems whilst recognising that all religions share the potential to exclude and maintain social control through adherence to codes of morality which can be discriminatory and oppressive.

Acknowledgements

I thank those students who completed the questionnaire and Philip Gilligan who gave me some helpful comments on the draft article.

References

- Beit-Hallahmi, B. and Argyle, M. (1997) *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience*. London: Routledge
- Bradford Metropolitan District Council (1996) *Population Trends Information Bulletin*. Bradford: Bradford MBC
- Canda, E.R. and Furman, L (1999) *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The heart of helping*. New York: The Free Press
- Canda, E.R. (1989) Religious content in social work education: A comparative approach. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 25,1, 36-45.

- Chief Executive's Research Section (1997) Population Forecast for Bradford District. Bradford: Bradford MBC
- Cobb, M. and Robshaw, V. (Eds) (1998) *The Spiritual Challenge of Health Care*. London: Churchill Livingstone.
- Darr, A. (2001) *The Underrepresentation of Asian Students on Nursing, Radiography and Physiotherapy Courses*. (Unpublished PhD thesis) Bradford: University of Bradford, Department of Applied Social Studies
- Derezotes, D.S. (1995) 'Spirituality and Religiosity: Neglected factors in social work practice', *Arete*, 20 (1), 1-15.
- DOH (2002) *The Requirements for Social Work Training* (www.doh.gov.uk/swqualification).
- GSCC (2002) *Social Work Education and Training Statistics Data Pack 2001-2002*. London: General Social Care Council
- Hockey, J. and James, A. (2003) *Social Identities across the Life Course*. Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Lewis, P. (2002) *Islamic Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris
- MacKinley, E.B. (2001) *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing*. London: Jessica Kingsley
- Modood, T., Berthoud, R., Lakey, J., Nazroo, J. Smith, P., Virdee, S. and Beishop, S. (1997) *Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. London: Policy Studies Institute
- Modood, T., Beishon, S. and Virdee, S. (1994) *Changing Ethnic Identities*. London: Policy Studies Institute
- Nash, M. and Stewart, B. (2002) *Spirituality and Social Care*. London: Jessica Kingsley
- National Statistics (2003) *Census 2001: National Report for England and Wales*. London: The Information Management Company (Available online at www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001)
- Patel, N., Naik, D. and Humphries, B. (Eds) (1998) *Visions of Reality Religion and Ethnicity in Social Work*. London: CCETSW
- Penketh, L. (2000) *Tackling Institutional Racism*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Ross, L.A. (1994) Spiritual aspects of nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19, 439-447
- Ross, L.A. (1997) Elderly patients' perceptions of their spiritual needs and care: A pilot study. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26, 710-715.
- Shams, M. and Jackson, P.R. (1994) Religiosity as a predictor of well-being and moderator of the psychological impact of unemployment. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 66, 341-352.
- Sheridan, M.J. and Amato-Von Hemert (1999) *The role of religion and*

spirituality in social work education and practice: A survey of student views and experiences. *Journal of Social Work*, 35,1,125-141.

Social Trends (2001) No.31 London: The Stationery Office.

Tuck, I., Pullen, I. and Lynn, C. (1997) Spiritual interventions provided by mental health nurses. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 19,3, 351-63.