

Spirituality in Social Work: A Re-Introduction to the Curriculum

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Abstract

Historically social work practice has its roots in religious values. Although social work has become a profession and has detached itself from sectarian institutions and ideologies, many social workers see a need for a renewal of commitment to spiritual issues in practice. This paper argues for the need for the profession to reflect upon its present course, especially in the realm of its present curriculum. Too much emphasis is given to the ego psychology/ environmental sphere, and not enough attention is given to the other gestalt. Social workers have to critically review the paradigm that they are operating with. Spirituality has to be brought back, albeit contextualized. More research has to be pursued in looking at the methodologies and effectiveness of the spiritual domain as practiced by some sectarian organizations. In doing so, not only will the social work profession learn more, it can use them as another avenue for referrals. Practice component in the social work curriculum must also find ways to expose students to settings where spirituality is the dominant model. There is so much to be gained by those exposures. The combination of the religion and the human sciences in social work education is much needed to the profession.

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Introduction

This paper attempts to shed some light on the origins and issues of social work values - questions that are currently of great concern to the profession. Of special

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interest would be the influence and contribution of religion, specifically the Buddhist/Hindu/Christian/Islamic traditions. These religions have shown interest in various aspects of the subject; their special problems highlight the deficiencies of an exclusively secular approach. While the reasons for the separation of religious and worldly matters are appreciated in a democratic country, however, in doing so the holistic approach to life is being compromised. With that concern in mind, there is the need for the re-introduction of spirituality components in present day social work theories and practices.

In the United States, based on data obtained from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), formal programs of social work program education began some 110 years ago. CSWE determined the present policy on social work education, whose content is essentially secular. Although experimentation and innovation are permitted, the institutions must receive the Council's approval through its Accreditation Commission (Boehm, 1959). The broad areas of content to be covered include "Social Welfare Policy and Services, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, and methods of Social Work Practice." It is assumed that under the above broad areas the student will be acquiring the necessary understanding of the emotional and spiritual factors of a person's life so that in the helping process he/she would draw on those resources appropriately. However, the strong secular emphasis in the total content of the curriculum, a reflection of the urge for the separation of the religious from the secular in most aspects of the American institution, invalidates this possibility in the welfare services to a great degree.

Similarly, the same can be said of the Malaysian experience. Formal social work was introduced into Malaysia by the British colonizers during the early 20th century (Mair, 1944). Consequently, the colonizers influenced most of present day structure in the institutions and curriculum. A strong secular emphasis in the content of social work education is still prevalent in all the institutions of higher learning that offer social work education. Efforts are being taken in Malaysia now to establish an accreditation body to monitor the competencies of the practitioners and the curriculums in the universities. While the guidelines are commendable, they are nevertheless heavily inclined towards secularism. Presently, there are four universities that are offering social work programs in Malaysia - Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, University of Malaya and Universiti Sabah Malaysia. The courses offered by these four universities reflect a curriculum that is heavily influenced by United States/United Kingdom experience.

Social Work Theories and Practices

Social work practice has its roots in religious activities for charity and social justice (Leiby, 1977). Although social work has become a profession and has detached itself from sectarian institutions and ideologies, many social workers see a need for a renewal of commitment to spiritual issues in practice. In Towle's Common Human Needs, the importance of taking into account the spiritual needs of clients so that

the fullness of their human dignity and potential is recognized and respected in all helping situation (Towle, 1965). Though his comments are made some forty years ago, his thesis is very much alive. Max Siporin and Irene Brower argue that because spirituality is a basic aspect of human experience, both within and outside the context of religious institutions, it should be explored more fully through social work research, theory building, and practice (Siporin, 1985; Brower, 1984). In Canda's (1988) comparative study of Christian, existentialist, Jewish, Shamanist, and Zen Buddhist social work practice, the findings showed that all defined spirituality as a concern with the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and for some, the Creator. Given this holistic view of spirituality, social work practice is itself a spiritual endeavor that involves the growth and fulfillment of client, professional helper, and the larger community (Ortiz, 1991).

Some argue that spiritual theory in social work practice is still far from being accepted, and at most considered as an adjunct to social work treatment (Keefe, 1986). While the debate goes on, in societies where life has yet to be categorized into sectarian and non-sectarian, people are continuing to benefit from the spiritual model, acceptability by the profession notwithstanding. Spirituality encompassed human activities of moral decision making, searching for a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and striving for mutually fulfilling relationships among individuals, society, and ultimate reality, however conceptualized. In that these aspects of human activity are common to all people, they are necessarily relevant to all areas of social work practice (Sheridan, Wilmer and Acheson, 1994).

Professional social work, a by-product of the industrial market system, is itself relatively new in human's endeavors. The path of spiritualism, the awakening to the inner reality, is perhaps a new trail in social work. It comes to the profession at a time when variety and eclecticism are the norms. As the instability, contradictions, and stress of the socioeconomic structure create a frantic search for relevant modes of treatment, the theories and methods espoused in the rich spiritual practices of many traditions will perhaps be another approach to be taken up in the interest of more effective practice.

Social Work in Malaysia

The heavy emphasis on social casework is still prevalent in Malaysia. Social caseworkers still represent the largest category of social work practitioners, the others being group workers and community workers/organizers. Social casework focuses clearly on the individual in his/her relation to others and to his/her environment setting. Although social group work and community organization differ in methodology, their objectives in terms of meeting the basic needs of the individual are the same. In light of the secular nature of the present curriculum, and the ever increasing social problems and issues the nation is facing, it is timely to review the very basic philosophy and value of social work which has roots embedded in the aforementioned religion.

Historical Perspectives

Everything we do in life is guided by the values that we accept and attempt to live by - in our personal life, social relations, in our business pursuits, and no less in our convictions about our being and our life's purpose. In looking at the crystallization of social work theory and practice in Malaysia, it is, then, highly important to examine the philosophic foundations upon which activities are based. What we as social workers do to meet our responsibilities to our clients, students and to one another, and how we do this, are matters of legitimate concern. As a democratic institution, social work bears a heavy obligation to carry out and to refine the values that are at the core of a democratic way of life.

A great deal of life depends on the acceptance of sound and consistent axioms or article of faith. According to Bisno (1952), social work is the art-science of helping people to help themselves, operates under the guidance of more or less explicit philosophical concepts dealing with the central question of why social workers do what they do and, in turn, with the objectives of social work which, in turn, to a considerable degree determine procedures. Philosophical concepts have always provided an understructure for social work practice. Many current concepts have remained stable for long periods; others have changed over time; some are relatively recent additions to the ideological scene. The sacredness of human life, for example, has long been accepted as a basic concept in today's civilization. But times are changing, the view of the locus of responsibility for sick or aged parents, as an example, has changed from one holding children to be exclusively responsible for the care and maintenance of their older folk to one in which society shares or, in some instances, takes over the whole burden. Social work philosophy, then, is not something static; it is a continually changing inventory of ideas and beliefs, reflecting the social conscience of the period and the state of science and technology as they influence man's conception of himself/herself, his/her nature, and his/her destiny (Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965).

Social work as we know it today has developed through two major routes: religion and the human sciences (sociology, psychology, anthropology, education, political science, biology, and medicine). To assume that a philosophical outlook referring to only one of these major routes can serve adequately as the understructure for all social work practice is therefore to distort, even to abort, the issue. Yet this is to great extent the tendency over the past half a century.

Value Antecedents

The issue of values is significant in social work, and the matter of value judgment is of prime importance. Values are the abstract elements that go into the structuring of concrete value judgments (Piccard, 1988). The concept that human beings are born fundamentally good, as espoused by monotheist religions, for example, is a judgment about the original nature of humankind, and his/her inclinations and tendencies in

relation to God, to his/her fellow being, and the world around him/her. Some will maintain that this view of human beings is true, others will insist that this statement be not true at all. A great deal depends upon how "good" is defined. In any event, neither agreement nor disagreement with this judgment can be established by a scientific approach or by scientific evidence. It is more in the nature of a belief, an axiom, and an article of faith. To the person who believes that it is true, no other view makes sense (Howard, 1969).

Similarly, most of social work basic philosophical views and judgments are established and maintained on faith, and cannot be proved scientifically. We inherit or derive our respective social philosophies and values from our culture or from some specific group with which we identify. With a few exceptions, we accept from our culture the view that to learn and to be educated is good; to refuse to learn and to be ignorant is bad. Most of us do not question that to have clean habits and to be healthy is good; to be undernourished and to be hungry is bad, and so on. We learn to recognize these alternative guides to behavior very early, either through direct experience or by being taught by our elders. Such judgments exist for all areas which involve the question whether something is true or untrue, beautiful or ugly, as well as good or bad. All these leads us back to the values that we inherited.

Malaysia has gone through remarkable advancements in science and technology since its independence. The contrast with the negligible discoveries in the study of man, however, is stunning. And within the relatively neglected area of the study of humankind, the study of his/her values has had low priority. Yet there is perhaps no element in his/her makeup that is more important than his/her values and the attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and patterns of behavior related to them (DuBois and Miley, 1992).

Values are critically involved in a client's maladjustments and in the processes the social worker pursues. The change from frustrations, failures, aimlessness, unhappiness, and personal disorganization depends, to a great extent, on the impact of social challenge on one's values. It is only relatively recent that the study of values by the application of objective scientific methods has developed (Miller, 1991). In the study, a value is seen as an intellectual-emotional judgment - of an individual, a group, or a society - regarding the worth of a thing, a concept, a principle, an action, or a situation. Values may have a moral or an amoral connotation. Some values are clearly relative, changing in accord with times and popular acceptance. Other values are more permanent and lasting, although their applications change in a changing society.

It is important for social workers to learn how we acquire values, the great role they play in understanding ourselves and others, and how they operate in the helping relationship. It is universally agreed that the profession's values, its principles governing the functioning of the social work specialist include (1) human worth and dignity; (2) the perfectibility of human nature; (3) acceptance of differences; (4) satisfying basic human needs; (5) freedom; (6) self-determination; (7) being nonjudgmental; (8)

constructive social participation; (9) importance of work and the constructive use of leisure; and (10) protection from threats to one's existence by man or nature. However, these values do not constitute a philosophy, as illustrated above. Various philosophies contribute their unique shares; and in some instances reinforce or support each other.

The above ten common denominators of values seem to be the characteristic of the social work profession as a whole and adhered to by all social welfare agencies, both public and private. However, additional values are also influential, particularly those representing the various religions that have their own standards of belief and conduct which is part of and which promote the differences in the pluralistic Malaysian culture. They are most evident, to be sure, in sectarian social work, but they also arise in public social work. These may be classed as secondary or special values; but secondary does not intimate lesser importance than attaches to the primary values (Konopka, 1958).

Other secondary values are also to be found with social class, national background, or political philosophy. According to Konopka (1958) social worker's disagreement on the secondary values is based on four factors: their cultural and family background; the precepts and demands of groups to which they belong - church, temple, mosque and so on; personal experiences; and different scientific theories regarding human behavior. Actually the distinction of primary and secondary values has only limited meaning. Once the distinction between them is disregarded, it becomes apparent that what actually exists is a variety of systems of thought about relationship of person to person, person to society, and person to his/her destiny, albeit a variety with considerable overlap.

An example of the kind of problems that arise out of the primary-secondary value distinction is revealed by Konopka's illustration of conflict between secondary values of the social work profession and the doctrines of the Catholics. The example involves a Catholic couple that comes to a Catholic agency in order to discuss with the social worker some marital problem related to their children. The issues are such that the social worker finds himself torn between ethical code of his profession - to accept the right of persons served to make their own decisions, unless they waive of that decision and give it to the authorities - and the precepts of his church, which does not admit the right of these people to make their own decision regarding the marriage. Konopka maintains that the social worker's clear differentiation between primary and secondary values will be "of help in solving this conflict." This conclusion is open to question.

Certainly the help is not self-evident, unless the primacy of primary social work values is to be taken as involving priority as well as consensus. Such a position is unrealistic. Indeed, it violates one of the basic principles in social work itself- self-determination. There would seem to be no reason why introduction of a Catholic religious principle, or any other religion, to prevent needless family breakdown, after everything else has failed, should be regarded as a violation of professional standards.

This brings to a second aspect of the impact of values. Values also operate in the sense that social workers are committed to them. In the one case the profession attempts to state its position in terms of principles under which it functions; in the other, individual social workers, who are expected to accept and operate under these values, have broader-ranging value complexes in which professional values are only a part.

The question of social workers' value conflicts deserves more consideration and study has received to date. Back in 1955 Allport made an interesting comment: "Even the best integrated of personalities do not act always consistently with their schemata of value. Irresistible impulse, threads of infantilism, violations of conscience are factors to be reckoned with in every life. What is more, the demands of our environment cause us to develop many systems of behavior that seem to dwell forever on the periphery of our being. They facilitate our commerce with our world but are never geared into our private lives. We know that we put on an appearance for the occasion, but we know too that such appearance is a mask-like expression of our persona and not central to our self-image. Much of our so-called 'role behavior' is of this sort. We are all forced to play roles that we regard as alien to us; but we know that they are not propriate but merely personate." Little has changed within humankind since Allport made his observation almost fifty years ago. Considering the number, variety, and the varying relative strengths of different values, in addition to the differences in the mental and physical capacities of different individuals, no two human beings present the same value configurations. In many cases the change in fundamental values and philosophy is not marked. In other instances, the social worker may compartmentalize his/her values, one set for personal and another for professional. In still other individuals great changes may occur, with many pre-training values displaced by a new set.

Another item of great importance which has not been as fully explored as it should is in the agency setting. Even purportedly nonsectarian private agencies often have at least an organizational sectarian justification that disposes them to sectarian values (Vigilante, 1983).

Spirituality

It is clear then that social workers operate under the influence of their own values and value systems, and in a multicultural society like Malaysia, it is important to perceive the client and to relate to him/her so that his/her values are not sympathetically understood but affirmatively utilized in the helping process, even if the worker entertains a negative attitude towards such values. Corollary to the last point, although technical proficiency and skills are essential in the application of all social work methods, more important are the values toward which these skills are directed, after all social work is an art-science. Inherent in all the social work values discussed above is the influence religion. Concepts like non-judgmental, self-determination, equality of opportunity, and the ultimate worth and dignity of all humankind are rooted in the teachings of the

major religions. Their perspective recognizes both the good and bad in people but not in the extremes of the other two positions. From this point of view, humans are viewed as fallible, but are also seen as having capabilities. That is, people can recognize problems, make choices, and seek solutions in ways that transcend their fallibility (Keith-Lucas, 1972).

Being in the twenty-first century, and notwithstanding the technological advances mankind has attained, unfortunately, social problems are increasing by leaps and bounds. Something is amiss in our effort to manage the social issues. As social workers it is time that we reflect on our technology - is it really solving and alleviating problems that we are facing daily, or is it perpetuating the vicious cycle, and what does it say about our curriculum that is lacking spirituality component?

In dealing with humankind one cannot separate the spiritual domain from the matter. Lately, too much emphasis is given to the scientific paradigm, and not enough attention is given to non-scientific paradigm -the other gestalt. As mentioned above, just because a particular mode of viewing things is not in "fashion" does not mean that one has to reject or ignore it. Years before social work became an institution, the practice of social work was greatly adorned with sectarian values and its entails. However, with the advent of the revolt against the church, it gave way to secularism. Consequently, came the Cartesian principle, and the likes of Dualism and Humanism, the secularization of social work began. Social workers have to critically review the paradigm that they are operating with. Spirituality has to be brought back, albeit contextualized, but it has to be in vogue again, and not simply as a token. In addition to spirituality conversion revolving around morality has to be prevalent. It seems that talk about what is moral and immoral is a taboo.

Sectarianism and secularism need not be seen as adversaries. They in fact should collaborate with one another. Both the social workers and clientele need the infusion of spiritualism in their constitution, the spiritual elements can be reaped from the richness of its Buddhist/Hindu/Christian/Islamic values, though not necessarily mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Society cannot afford the polemics between the two "camps," they need solutions, and presently the social situation is not looking bright with the way the issues are being managed with an exclusive secular approach.

Methodology

Curriculum: i) Social workers have to develop self-understanding regarding existential issues and spiritual growth. To understand clients' values and spirituality is not enough for present day social workers, they should examine their own beliefs, motivations, values, and activities before they embark on helping out others. The cultural paradigm should be used as an overarching framework to provide the needed dynamics. As such the study of other traditions, religions and cultures is a must for all social workers, if significant help is to be rendered.

Otherwise, all help can be considered as token, the old “band-aid” syndrome played all over.

Given that achieving ecumenical spirit may sometimes be difficult, the more reason why interfaith discussions and studies have to be infused in the curriculum. There cannot be tolerance if there is no knowledge. Only then would the meaning of self-determination can be fully appreciated. A social worker has to be honest in referencing the clients to someone who is more akin to the clients’ spiritual orientations.

- ii) Human timeless journey is specifically spelled out in the life cycle stages of each individual, programmed by the Creator with specific needs, goals, developmental cycles, and specific brain/mind and behavior manifestations that require external cultural religious, educational, archetypal compasses, inputs for the wayfarer on his/her journey. Based on this paradigm, it is important for social work students to gain alternative explanation of human development.

The composition of human is not purely matter. There is the other side, i.e., the spirit (the soul). To be exposed to the explanations given by the various spiritual traditions of various religions and beliefs will only enhance the social worker in his/her understanding of the human constitution. Human development thus, is no longer only seen from an Eriksonian, Jungian, Freudian and the likes, but now also coming from the more esoteric side.

- iii) Social work students are given many theories that explain the cause of man’s problems - ranging from biological, economical, psychological, environmental and at times even spiritual. However, it seems now spiritual crisis is seen as a secondary symptom. An alternative hypothesis has to be thrown at in the academic discussions of the plight of human sufferings.

Humankind is suffering because the spirit-soul is in pain. Soothing the pain of the soul, other peripheral symptoms will be contained. The journey of this struggle according to most spiritualists is the cleansing of the mind to come to terms with the instinctive “animal-like” (phylogenetic) wishes, needs, motives and behaviors as it tries to manifest itself during the individual’s life (ontogenesis). The person is in turmoil with the instincts, undifferentiated emotions, unreflective behavior and the need for guidance, re-direction and the need for spiritual values, for order, nature and God (Bakhtiar, 1996). The new born child, the developing child, the adult and the elderly need a model of spiritual, timeless order grounded in the monotheism and humanization that anticipates the person’s biological, psychological, social and spiritual needs/aspirations. The phylogenetic, ontogenetic and spiritual perspectives of humans have to be balanced. The “I want what I want when I want it” voice deep within humans has to be tempered.

Conclusion

Social work students have to expose themselves to the timeless, universal values in a system of justice balanced by wisdom, temperance and courage. There is a need now than ever to have a well-coordinated relationship between social work institutions (both universities and social delivery agencies) with mosques, temples and churches. Emphasis is then needed to probe into the esoteric teachings of the latter institutions. The spiritual model, without much fanfare, is doing a lot of intervention work. More research has to be pursued in looking at their methodologies and effectiveness. In doing so, it will raise their model to the level of acceptance by the scientific community.

Practice component in the social work curriculum must find ways to expose students to settings where spirituality is the dominant model. There is so much to be gained by those exposures. Fear of proselytization is premature. In the profession of helping those in need, petty comparisons of beliefs have to be transcended. Even for those social workers that do not believe in the spirituality model, they need to confront their reservations. Rather than operating in distrust, mutuality of the positive aspects of spirituality is required.

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